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NOVEMBER 1984 $1.75

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VIEWPOINT

ON THINGS UNFLATTENED BY SCIENCE

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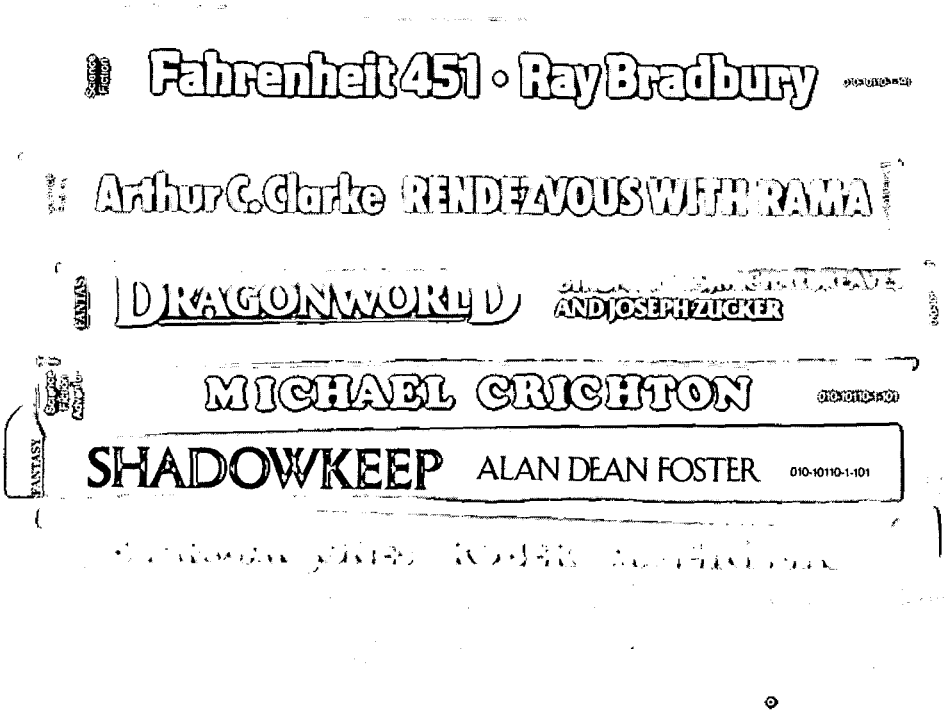

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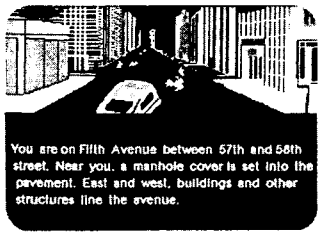
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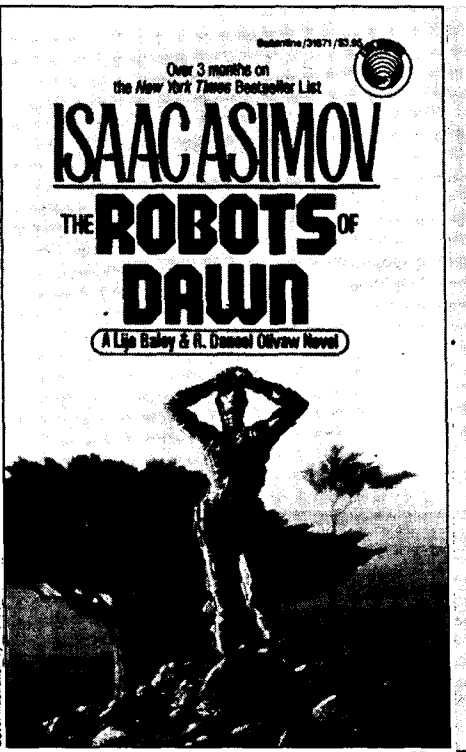

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

FASTER THAN LIGHT

In the April 1984 issue of *Asimov's*, I editorialized on time travel as one phenomenon that was almost certainly impossible, even in theory, and yet one that could not be abandoned as a concomitant of even the hardest of hard science fiction stories. The plots it made possible were too interesting and lent themselves too well to all sorts of investigations of the human condition.

The only other impossibility that equals it as a science fiction essential is superluminal (faster than light) travel. Without superluminal travel, science fiction writers are confined to the Solar system (plus, possibly, a few of the very nearest stars) unless they are willing to involve themselves with starships that travel for generations, or with long-time freezing, or with time dilatation.

It is only routine superluminality that makes Galactic empires, and such things as interstellar warfare, really practical.

There is this difference between time-travel and superluminal travel, however. I imagine that most people are willing to think of time-travel as essentially fantasy, but to consider superluminal travel as fantasy seems to annoy, and even enrage, a large fraction of the SF readership. *Why* isn't superluminal travel possible? What is so magic about the speed of light? Surely, if you keep accelerating long enough and hard enough, you are bound to "break the light-barrier."

People think that because they judge from every day experience. If a force is applied to an object, it accelerates—that is it moves faster in the direction in which the force is applied. As long as the force continues to be applied, the object continues to move faster and faster. There is no sign (under ordinary conditions) that this situation will change; that there is a mysterious speed limit at which the object will suddenly stop accelerating, no matter what the force.

To be sure, as a force is applied to an object, physicists are quite certain that the momentum of that object increases indefinitely, and comes ever closer to the infinite. The same can be said of an object's kinetic energy. The value of the momentum of a moving body is the product of its mass and its velocity (mv). The value of the kinetic en-

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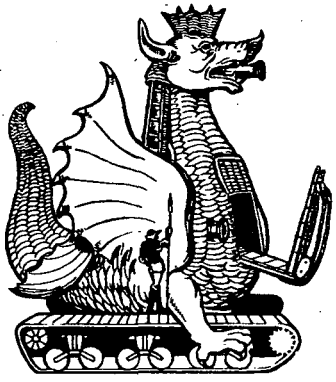

Characters begin the game as "normal" humans, but there is no limit to how powerful the characters can become. The gaming system is reasonably simple, with additional and optional rules that can be added as the basic rules are mastered. The game system even allows Game Masters to add their own rules, if desired.

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ergy of a moving body is the product of its mass and half the square of its velocity ($mv^2/2$).

Since the commonsense notion is that the mass of a body (simplistically defined as "the quantity of matter it contains") does not change with motion, it follows that momentum and kinetic energy must increase only because the velocity increases. And if momentum and kinetic energy increase indefinitely as a force continues to be applied, that can only mean that velocity must increase indefinitely. There seems no way out of that syllogism, so what is all this junk about the speed-of-light limit.

This "junk" started with Albert Einstein in 1905. It seemed to Einstein that the speed of light in a vacuum must always be measured at the same speed (just under 300,000 kilometers per second) no matter what the motion of the light-source might be relative to the observer who was making the measurement. This seemed to follow from the Michelson-Morley experiment two decades earlier, but Einstein insisted he did not know of that experiment but came to his conclusion as a result of certain thought experiments that showed that any other behavior of light would result in paradoxes.

This constancy of the speed of light did not seem to make sense. Ordinary moving objects, such as a thrown ball, had speeds that depended in part on the motion of the person or object throwing the ball, and it certainly seemed this rule should apply to everything including light. Why should light have a special status?

But supposing Einstein's assumption is so. In that case, the whole Universe ought to be organized in such a way as to make it so and Einstein developed his "Special Theory of Relativity" to describe a Universe in which light behaved in this unusual fashion. In order for light so to behave, Einstein showed that mass ought to increase in quantity for a moving object. It should increase, as a matter of fact, according to a set relationship: $M = m/\sqrt{1 - v^2/c^2}$, where v is the speed of the object, c is the speed of light in the vacuum, m is the mass of the object when it is not moving ("rest-mass"), and M is the mass of the object when it is moving at velocity v.

Up to the beginning of the 20th Century, no living thing and no human artifact managed to attain a speed of as much as 0.1 kilometers per second, or 1/3,000,000 the speed of light. Even now, when we add supersonic airplanes and interplanetary rockets to the list of human artifacts, 15 kilometers per second, or 1/20,000 the speed of light, is about the top speed we have obtained.

If we use Einstein's formula and imagine a 1-kilogram object speeding at 15 kilometers per second, its mass at that speed would be 1.0000000013 kilograms. It would have gained 1⅓ micrograms, or a little over a billionth of its rest mass. It is doubtful whether such a gain in mass with motion could be measured with any degree of precision, or indeed if it could be directly measured at all—and this is in the case of a speeding rocket. Ordinary speeds here on Earth's surface would be far smaller than that of a rocket, and the gain in

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mass would be correspondingly smaller. No wonder it seemed to people, and even to scientists, that mass did not change with motion.

In fact, suppose we imagined an object moving past us at the enormous speed of 30,000 kilometers per second (a speed that nothing we have ever seen with the unaided eye has even begun to approach). Such a speed is 1/10 that of light and by Einstein's equation a 1-kilogram object moving at such a speed would have a mass (at that speed) of 1.005 kilograms. It would have increased in mass by only about 0.5 percent or 1 1/200 of its rest mass.

If we can imagine 30,000 kilometers per second, we can imagine still higher speeds. A 1-kilogram mass, moving at 60,000 kilometers per second, would have a mass of 1.021 kilograms. At 90,000 kilometers per second, it would have a mass of 1.048 kilograms; at 120,000 kilometers per second, it would have a mass of 1.091 kilograms; and at 150,000 kilometers per second, it would have a mass of 1.155 kilograms.

But 150,000 kilometers per second is half the speed of light. Yet even then, the gain in mass is only 15.5 percent. The moving mass is not quite 1 1/6 times the rest-mass. This doesn't seem very serious. In fact, the mass of a moving object doesn't reach the figure of 2 times its rest mass until it is moving at a speed of 260,000 kilometers per second, or just about 7/8 the speed of light. Please note, however, that the mass has been increasing at a faster and faster rate as the speed increases.

The more mass an object has, the

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less it can be made to accelerate in response to a given force. A force applied to an object moving at 260,000 kilometers per second (and therefore with twice its rest-mass) will produce only half the acceleration that force would have produced if it had been applied to the same object when it was at rest. As an object speeds up under a constant force, its mass increases ever more rapidly and its speed increases ever more slowly. The mass increase predominates so that momentum and kinetic energy continue to increase more rapidly even though speed increases more slowly.

By the time we reach a speed of 290,000 kilometers per second (97 percent of the speed of light), the mass of the moving body is 3.892 kilograms, almost four times the original mass. At 295,000 kilometers per second (98.3 percent of the speed of light—if that is taken at the slightly incorrect 300,000 kilometers per second figure), 5.52 kilograms; at 299,000 kilometers per second (99.7 percent of the speed of light), 12.22 kilograms; at 299,999 kilometers per second (99.9997 percent of the speed of light) 383.5 kilograms.

At the speed of light itself, if that could be reached, the mass would be infinite—as would be the momentum and the kinetic energy.

A faster speed is impossible because neither mass, momentum nor kinetic energy can be more than infinite. Besides at infinite mass, no force, however great, can produce any acceleration, however small, so the speed cannot increase. —So the speed of light is the limit that cannot be passed.

And yet all this depends upon the validity of Einstein's equation, which in turn depends upon a correct deduction from Einstein's basic assumption. What if the equation is wrong, or has been incorrectly deduced, or is based on a faulty assumption?

We would still be wondering about that, perhaps, were it not that a decade before Einstein advanced his theory, subatomic particles were discovered. These tiny objects can be observed to move at large fractions of the speed of light. Their mass can be measured with considerable precision, and it was found not only that their mass increased with speed, but *precisely* to the amount predicted by Einstein's equation.

That means that light hurries through the vacuum at the ultimate and absolute speed limit. Ways of evading that limit (tachyons, black holes, hyperspace) have been suggested, but all involve phenomena concerning which we can only speculate, and in favor of which there is no observational evidence *whatever*.

Nevertheless, superluminal travel cannot and will not be abandoned in science fiction. Certainly, *I* will never abandon it. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I would hope that by this day and age there are more English teachers like Wanna L. Hite (Letters, Feb. 1984), who look upon Science Fiction as respectable reading material and not in the same light as the *National Enquirer*. It has been nearly twenty years since my high school days in New York City. I remember back to that day when my English teacher threw me out of class and notified the principal because I dared bring in a science fiction paperback—by you.

Sincerely,

William S. Daniels
Arcadia, CA

P.S. Best wishes for a speedy and complete recovery, Dr. Asimov.

By me? *Good heavens! I could understand it if it were something by some inferior writer such as Clarke or Heinlein, but by* me!

—Isaac Asimov

To Ms. McCarthy, the Good Doctor, et al.:

I would like to congratulate you on a job well done, as evidenced by the overall quality of the last year's issues.

Let me also say that I fail to understand how anyone could *complain* about the inclusion of the occasional well-written fantasy in *IAsfm!* Variety is the spice of life, as they say. If people are too blind to realize this, let them read *Omni*.

Please consider running an article on languages and/or names and naming (creating "alien" words.) This is a topic of interest to many people, not just would-be writers. C.J. Cherryh has done a couple of things on these lines, but it is often hard to find the "nuts and bolts" data when you try to duplicate the techniques.

Sincerely yours,

John Day
Lincoln, NB

An article on "alien" words might be interesting, but I don't know that there are definite rules involved. My own system is to make names of people 1) easy to pronounce, and 2) of no clear ethnic variety; i.e. Golan Trevize, Janov Pelorat, Stor Gendibal and so on. But each person can invent his own system.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Martin Gardner,

Another way to waste my time! Enclosed is a list of extremely uninteresting, mostly exotic words, which fit the criteria of your "Technology on VZIGS" article (May 1984).

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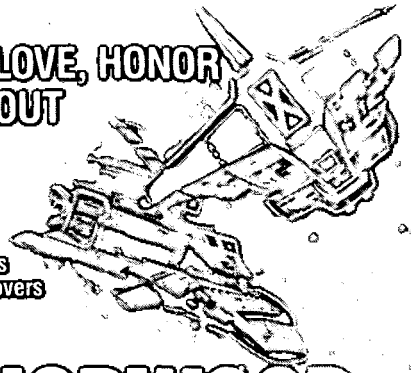

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About halfway through my word search I found this one—something straight out of the Twilight Zone. The word "wizard," recoded, becomes "draziw"—its reverse. It is enough to make one wonder if there might be something in nomenology or numerology or whatever. Then again, maybe not.

Even for someone whose life includes exquisitely dull periods this project provided a new low. "EFTS"—"VUGH." Ugh, indeed! Please do not ask me to do this sort of thing again. I've always had a warm regard for you and hate to refuse you anything but enough is enough.

Yours truly,

Patricia W. Moore
Golden Valley, MN

*Mrs. Moore was the first to respond to my request for English words that become other words in a reverse alphabet cipher (*A = Z, B = Y, C = X, *and so on). Among the five-letter words she discovered are:* girl - trio, girth - trigs, grogs - tilth. *So far, no six-letter examples are known. The fact that* wizard *turns into* wizard *backwards is truly astonishing.*

—Martin Gardner

Salutations

Having sucessfully (I hope) avoided offending those distinguished executives currently responsible for your fine magazine, please allow me to thank you, good doctor (Good Doctor?), for providing the missing (and sorely missed) elements of science fiction so dear to all who are serious about their pleasure. The publication of a monthly magazine that provides not only immense pleasure through the fresh and often thought-stimulating short stories, but also hard science fact that is not only informative, but generally provides support for the conjectures presented by the fiction authors is a joy to those who believe in man's future. But by far, my personal gratitude is extended for the insight provided into the beliefs and personal convictions of the world's most prolific (and in my opinion entertaining) science fiction author that provides the most pleasure.

In recent issues you have requested reader feedback on your magazine. Therefore, herein follow my humble observations. The overall format of the magazine is, in my opinion, excellent.

The only changes I might suggest would be to:

1) Spread the brain-teaser puzzles of Mr. Gardner over a two-issue period. This is purely selfish in that I habitually read each issue in its entirety as soon as it is received, and I invariably "fudge" and read the answers before I have given them my best shot.

2) I would like to see a new addition to the monthly offerings: a "Newcomers" showcase. Specifically a work by those young authors who have never been published.

Your present effort to present new talent is commendable and please, keep up the good work, but I think the added recognition would serve as incentive for those of us who have never really convinced

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ourselves that publication is possible.

3) Finally, as with all who are faithful, more works from the patriarch would be most welcome.

Thank you for your time and for the hundreds of hours of pleasure your efforts have given me. Of course you will find the traditional S.A.S.E. enclosed. Who knows? Maybe a star will be born.

Yours with the greatest respect and admiration,

D. L. Hosted
10360 Bordelon St.
San Diego, CA 92124

I'm in two minds about a "Newcomers" showcase. It encourages new writers, but on the other hand it seems to put them in a "second-class citizen" situation. We do publish new writers and their "first stories" but by putting those stories into the magazine without a special classification we emphasize that new writers are writers. *Incidentally, a "patriarch" generally refers to some old, old man. Who on earth can you be referring to?*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a sophomore at Batesville High School in Batesville, Indiana, and I have been assigned to write a term paper about your life. I am really excited about it because I enjoy your writing very much.

When I went to our school and public libraries to get articles about you, I found that they had very little to nothing about you. I would like to rectify that situation by having you send me some information about yourself that I could pass on to the library. This would help others as I have met a lot of people here that do not know who you are. If you could help me out with some information about your life and career I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you for your help and consideration.

Steve Wickens
Batesville, IN

I wonder if it would do any good to seize this occasion to remind people generally that I have written a fat, two-volume autobiography: In Memory Yet Green *(Doubleday, 1979) and* In Joy Still Felt *(Doubleday, 1980). Both have appeared as Avon trade paperbacks. Get your libraries to buy them if you think they need information on me.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

It is hard to argue with success (January, 1984) but I'll try. I'm happy for you with your 25% rise in subscriptions, and I've just extended mine. But you hand me misgivings:

Yes, I can do without crosswords, without riddles, without gaming. This would delight me. A good, strong vote for Viewpoint, however. I'm not interested in conventions. However, they take up little space, and I'm sure there are aficionados.

Now we come to Letters. They're fascinating, as are your comments, and those of the good Doctor. There will always be controversy over the problem of SciFi and/or Fantasy.

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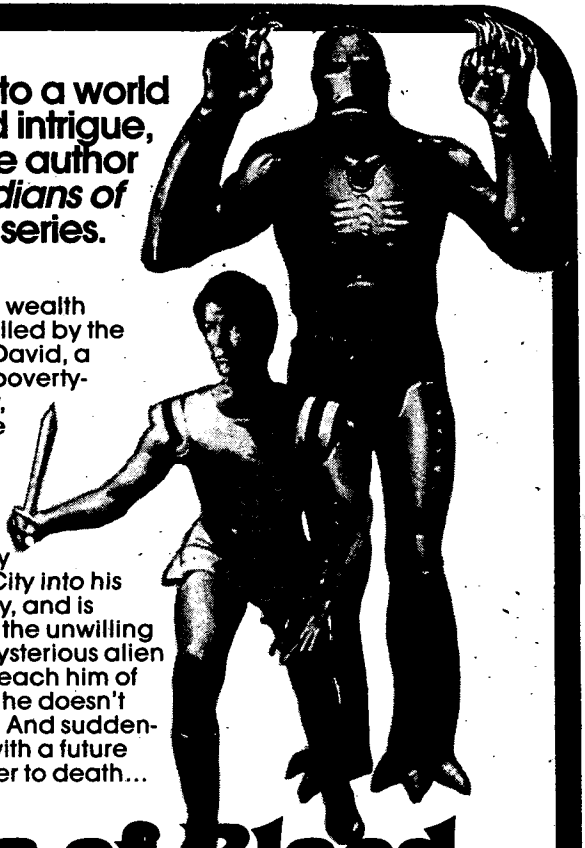

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It's all fantasy anyway, but damned little fantasy is SciFi. I enjoy both, and, in spite of the Magazine's title, which is non-descriptive of content, I'd just ask you to buy the best stories that come to your desk.

But that does not include such junky non-stories as "Mars Needs Beatniks," "Red Shift," or "The Catherine Wheel," all in the January 1984 issue. They are all imitation fiction, and were a horrible waste of good white space which would have been better presented unsullied with ink.

Now, if you can find another "Blued Moon," or just want to rerun it to fill the above acquired white space I'd love your good taste and praise your find. You must realize that that story was the sole representative of SciFi in the entire issue, though that was not the reason I liked it. It is an inventive, humorous, well-constructed tale. They're scarce, but happily you found it and printed it.

Happy editing and purchasing,

W. F. Poynter,
Subscriber
Santa Rosa, CA

If every story were a "Blued Moon," we'd all be happy, wouldn't we? You don't think we get a dozen of them and yawn and say, "Oh, well, one's enough," do you? Any reader is bound not to like a story or two per issue, but you should see what we reject.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Thank you for the many wonderful hours of enjoyment you have provided me through your magazine (and all for the price of three movies per year!).

In addition to the high quality fiction, I have greatly enjoyed all but one of the Viewpoint essays, which brings me to the second purpose (after saying Thanks!) of this letter.

When I started Martin Gardner's "Great Moments in Pseudoscience" I expected a humorous anecdotal satire.

What I discovered was a missed opportunity for an entertaining article (a lot of funny stuff resides in the fringes of science) and an inappropriate attack-*cum*-advertisement.

First, I suspect my views on "pseudoscience" are very similar to Mr. Gardner's. I, too, yearn for more science in science fiction. "The Nanny" by Thomas Wylde in the same issue sets a good example of attention to detail and scientific accuracy in a fascinating story. However, I do not feel well represented by passionate language such as, "Are you fed up with the flood of paranormal crap that oozes from . . . irresponsible . . . cynical book publishers who would rather make a fast buck. . . ." Language like this generally replaces reason, rather than serving it. The pejorative treatment of "paranormal" ignores the lessons that advancing science has taught us repeatedly: humility in our ignorance and modesty in our judgement of others' ideas. I suspect many readers of this fine magazine find themselves outside the mainstream of "normal" thought and wisdom; I, myself, certainly make no claim to excessive normalcy. Every month

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100,000 people in this country buy *IAsfm*; the other 99.96 percent do not.

Secondly, regardless of the merit of Mr. Gardner's argument, the Viewpoint section is not the place for a twelve page spread culminating in a solicitation for $16.50 for a subscription.

This is more than a nominal fee and the article amounts to free advertising. Whether the venture is for profit or not, giving away advertising space is a questionable use of limited resources and it is an unacknowledged endorsement by you, as editor. Gardner criticizes John Campbell, Jr. for proselytizing on behalf of dianetics, and "enthusiastically promoting" ideas to, among other things, sell magazines. In this article, Gardner applies the same method and has effectively enrolled the editorial support of your fine magazine.

Thank you for your consideration. Keep up the good work: the quality shows!
Sincerely,

Jay Paul Myers
Castro Valley, CA

P. S.: I love the puzzles—keep them coming!

Come, come, have you ever read the attacks by the pseudoscientists on "orthodox" science? They slaver and foam at the mouth as they rave their idiocies. Why are scientists and rationalists expected to be polite in return? Most are—or are silent. Some, however (and of that number I am one), intend to give back blow for blow. I will never be anyone's *punching bag.*

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Editors (meaning the good Doctor, Shawna, Joel Davis, and all and sundry others who prepare this for publication . . . but really, and mostly this is . . . to Rick Pattay, in Waterville, Ohio):

Really now, I must express strong opposition to that statement that " . . . (no one) under the mental age of 18 . . . is a regular reader . . ." When *Galaxy* was offering quality stories, that's what I exposed children to. Now it's *IAsfm*. And I assure you that some of these children are not of the mental age of 18, even if that were a valid criterion. It's not, of course.

Take a child who is running an IQ of 150, or 160. (Awfully dogmatic things, these IQ tests . . . often inaccurate. But we must live with them.) Then consider that when these people need something to expand their thinking, and enjoy challenging reading, Science Fiction is an excellent thing to expose them to. And am I to offer them the magazine, and say "I think you'll enjoy this, but let's not get into thus and so"? Ha! This bit you published about the phoenix is a case in point. (That was by Abrams, I think.) The 8-year-old read it very selectively, re-read it with enjoyment, and picked it up a month later, because she had forgotten something she wanted to quote.

Or, to get into fiction, what about "Enemy Mine"? Excellent example of bigotry side-tracked, besides being just plain good writing . . . plot, characterization, just enough detail . . . most excellent. A 6-year-old enjoyed *that*.

No, what we have here is a magazine that is, as you pointed out, dear Doctor, a *family* magazine. And these kids who have a mental age of 16 to 18 . . . well, you figure it out. What is their emotional age? And some of these children with high IQ's and learning disabilities have lower emotional ages than "average." So I agree with most of your readers who said a minimal amount of sex and violence when it is an integral part of the story is acceptable. But some of your stories seem to have no purpose except to present sex. . . . There are very few of these . . . could be fewer.

By all means keep the gaming section. *I* don't enjoy it, but I know many who do, up to and beyond my own age. (I'm within a couple of years of that doctor whose name is Isaac.) And sometimes I enjoy the crossword puzzles, but one 12-year-old *usually* does. Math puzzles intrigue an 18-year-old.

The bottom line here is that if I want to be able to keep this on the table in my living room for all and sundry to enjoy, let's have diversified and sundry stuff in it, including fantasy . . . oh, that's delightful, and shades into science fiction almost imperceptibly. (Which is "Broken Wings"?)

Rosaleen Dushoff

Suppose we say that good science fiction is enjoyed by intelligent people of all ages. If so, that means we must keep an intelligent audience in mind and not worry about the age. The youngsters will keep up with us, and by the time the streets have finished educating them, there's nothing much we can tell them about sex and violence.

—Isaac Asimov

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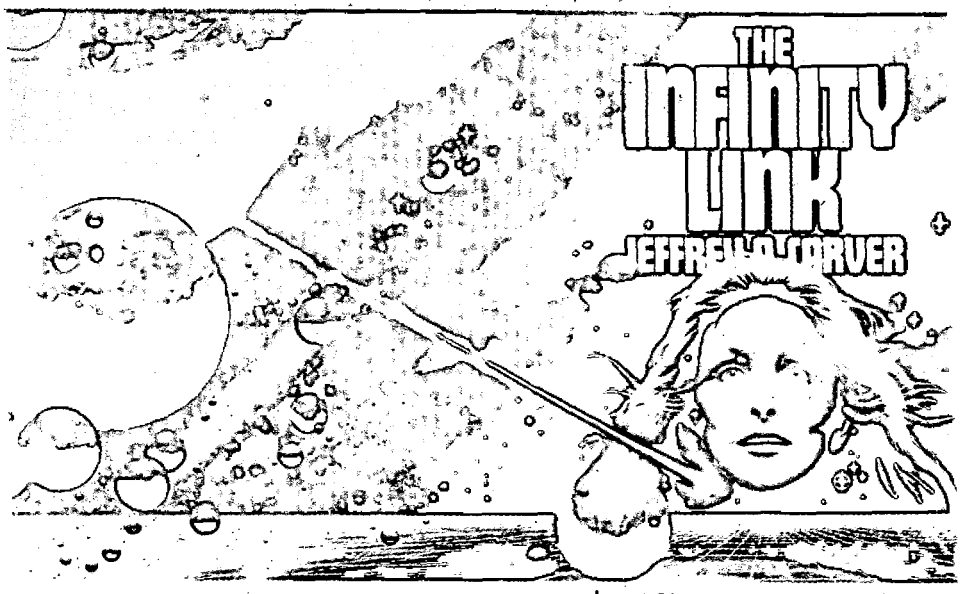

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Most fantasy role-playing games got their inspiration, if not their ideas, characters, and monsters, from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although loosely based on Tolkien's books, these games don't really let you adventure in Middle-earth.

That is, until now. Iron Crown Enterprises Inc. has released *Middle-earth Role Playing (MERP),* a complete fantasy system for adventuring in the world described in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* ($8.00 in book form, or $12.00 for the boxed edition at your local store, or direct from Box 1605, Charlottesville, VA 22902).

Before reviewing what's inside this new game, I had to ask myself: "Does the market really need another fantasy role-playing game?" There are literally dozens already available. The game that started the hobby of role-playing, *Dungeons & Dragons®* by TSR Inc., was introduced 10 years ago in December, 1974. Since then, a lot of other role-playing designs have been introduced, so why another one?

Iron Crown sensed a need for a new fantasy system. Most other fantasy role-playing (frp) games have ridden the coattails of *D&D®* and appeal to gamers who are already playing frp games. Very few new games have been released that have been deliberately aimed at the beginner. In this regard, *MERP* is the first major attempt to attract new people to the hobby of role-playing.

Its great market potential lies in the fact that Tolkien and Middle-earth are already familiar to millions of readers. By presenting Middle-earth in a game format, Iron Crown believes a lot of people may be attracted to the game—people who might not otherwise take role-playing games seriously.

Experienced gamers (myself included) sometimes forget how important it is to bring new people into the hobby. Because of its Tolkien license, Iron Crown probably has the best opportunity of all role-playing game publishers to accomplish this.

That doesn't mean *MERP* has nothing to offer high-level adventurers (11th level or above). There's a tremendous wealth of information in Iron Crown's system, and at only $8.00 for the 104-page book, it's a real bargain, especially compared to some of the 32-page adventure modules that currently sell for $5.00 or more.

Although a new system, *MERP* is presented in a general way to enable a dungeon master or referee to incorporate much Middle-earth data into their current frp games. Even if you don't want to change frp systems, the background information and details

(Continued on page 93)

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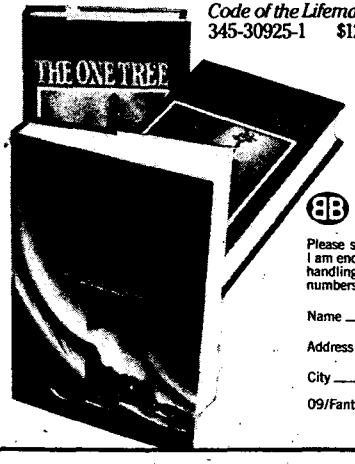

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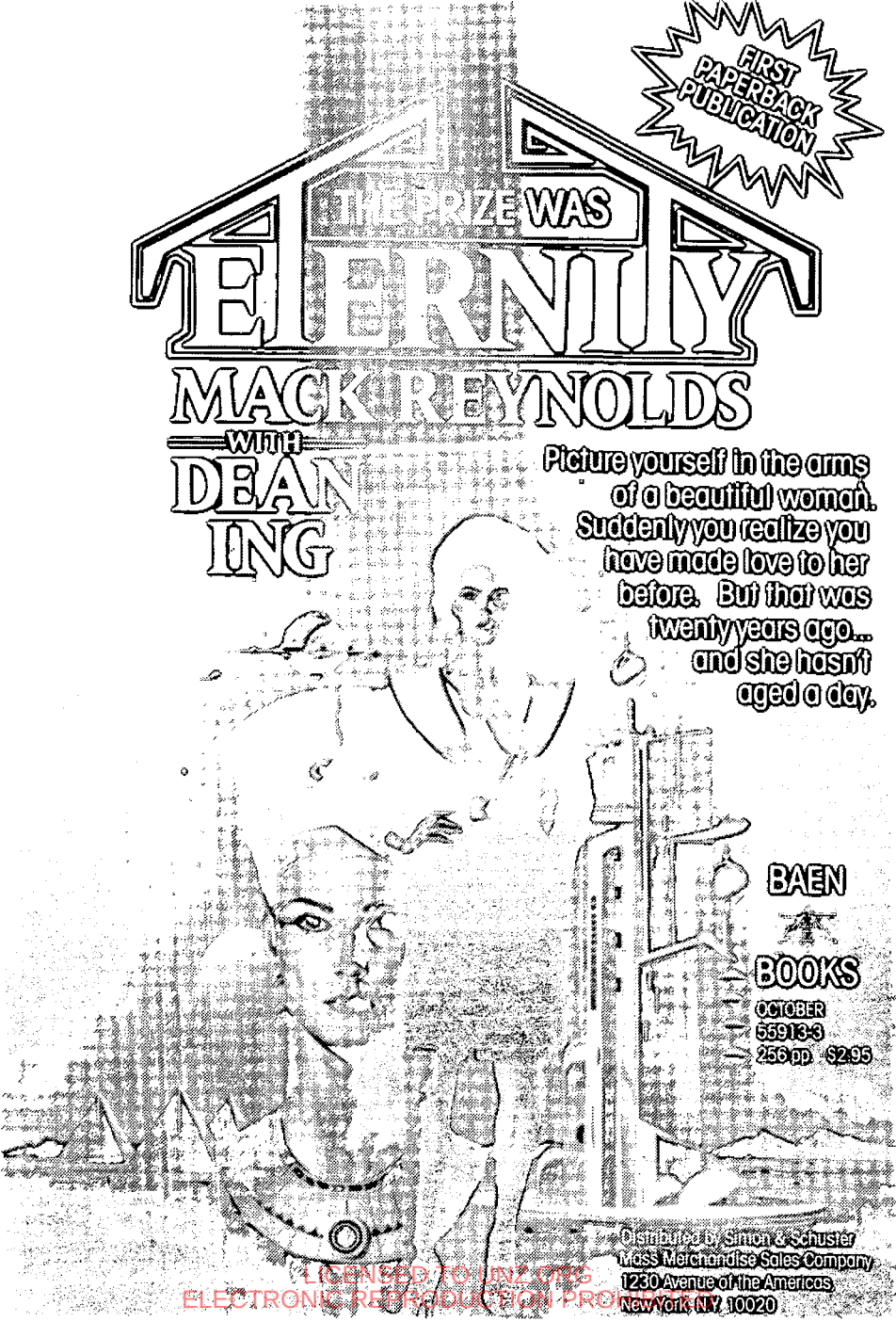
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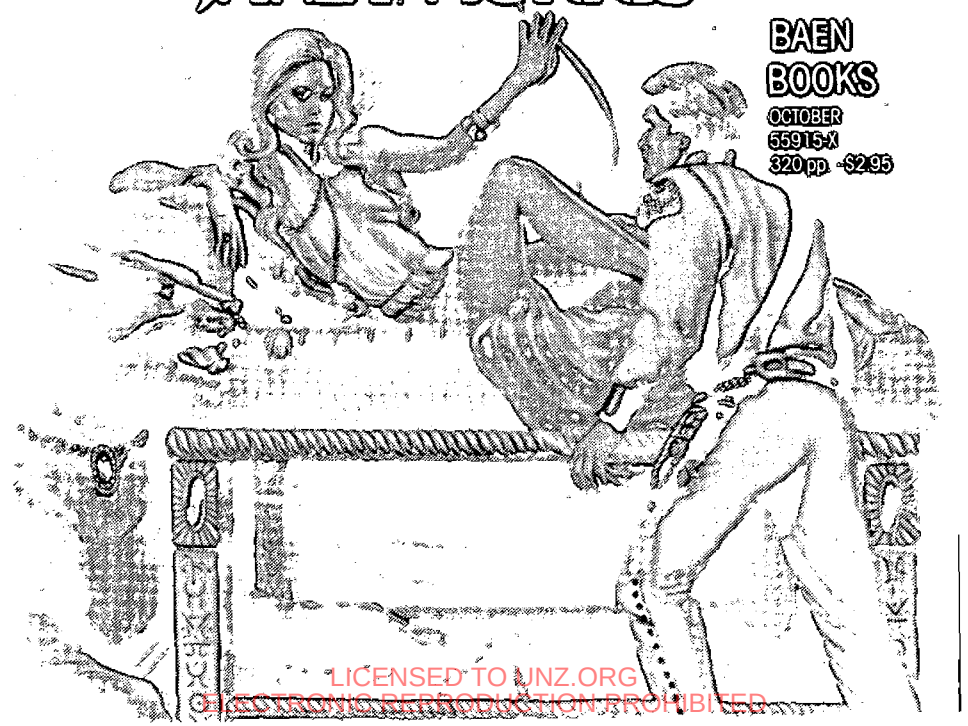

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VIEWPOINT

THINGS UNFLATTENED BY SCIENCE

by Lewis Thomas

Lewis Thomas, M.D. wrote *Lives of a Cell* in 1974 and won the American Book Award in 1981 for *The Medusa and the Snail.* He is chancellor of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and chairman of the board of the Scientists' Institute for Public Information. This article is from his book *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony.*

art: J.K. Potter

In one of her Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1980, Helen Gardner had some sharply critical things to say about criticism, particularly about the reductionist tendencies of contemporary literary criticsm, and especially about the new New Criticism out of France known as deconstructionism, the reductionist fission of poetry, not line by line but word by word, particle by particle. She was

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VIEWPOINT

worried about the new dogma that the poem itself cannot possess any meaning whatever, beyond the random insights brought to the words by the reader, the observer. The only reality to be perceived in a line of verse is a stochastic reality arranged by the observer, not by the creator of the line. Miss Gardner is dismayed by this affront to literature. "It marks," she writes, "a real loss of belief in the value of literature and of literary study, . . . dignified and partly justified by being linked with a universal skepticism about the possibility of any real knowledge of the universe we live in or any true understanding of the world of our daily experience." The "indeterminacy of literary texts," she says, "is part of the indeterminacy of the world."

Joan Peyser, in an introduction to the new edition of her ten-year-old book on modern music, expresses a similar level of dismay at what is happening to contemporary music. She writes, "The lessening of greatness in the music of modern times can be traced to Darwin, Marx, Einstein and Freud"; she adds, "the dissemination of their theories propelled everything hidden into the light; analysis annihilates mystery."

The geneticist C. H. Waddington asserted in his book on modern art that some of the earliest manifestations of abstract expression in modern painting, notably the work of Kandinsky and his followers, came from a feeling of hostility toward early twentieth-century physics. Kandinsky believed that scientists were "capable only of recognizing those things that can be weighed and measured."

Annie Dillard, writing about the impact of modern physics on modern fiction, in a wonderful book on criticism entitled *Living by Fiction*, says, "nothing is more typical of modernist fiction than its shattering of narrative line. . . . The use of narrative collage is particularly adapted to twentieth-century treatments of time and space . . . a flattened landscape. . . . Events do not trigger other events at all; instead, any event is possible. . . . The world is an undirected energy; it is an infinite series of random possibilities." "This," she continues, "is the fiction of quantum mechanics," and she doesn't care much for it. She believes that there is meaning in the world, but concludes that the

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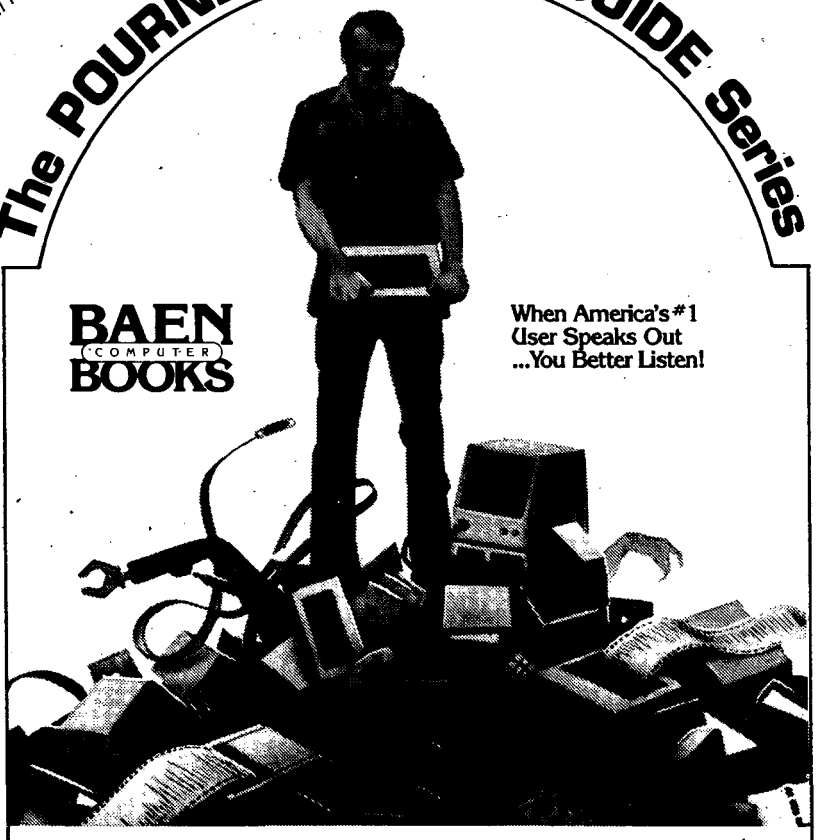

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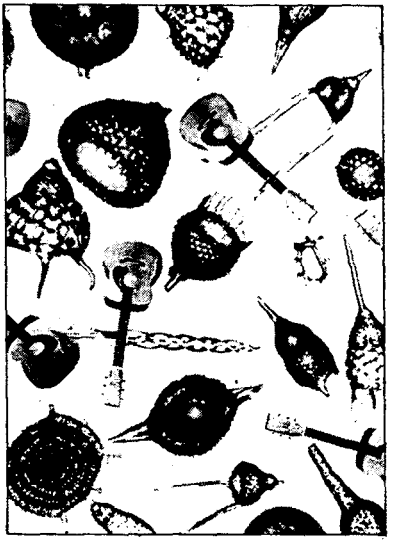
lyric poets are the best equipped of all of us to find it.

I wish the humanists, wherever they are—the artists, writers, poets, critics, and musicians (most of all the musicians)—would leave physics alone for a while and begin paying more attention to biology. Personally, having read my way through a long shelf of books written by physicists for nonmathematicians like me, I have given up looking for the meaning, any meaning at all, in the worlds of very small or very large events. I've become convinced that any effort to insert mysticism into quantum mechanics, or to get mysticism out of it, or indeed to try to force new meanings into the affairs of the everyday, middle-sized world, is not for me. There are some things about which it is not true to say that every man has a right to his own opinion. I do not have the right to an opinion about acausality in the small world, or about black holes or other universes beyond black holes in the large world, for I cannot do the mathematics. Physics, deep and beautiful physics, can be spoken only in pure, unaccented mathematics, and no other language exists for expressing its



"There are some things about which it is not true to say that every man has a right to his own opinion. I do not have the right to an opinion about acausality in the small world, or about black holes or other universes beyond black holes in the large world, for I cannot do the mathematics. . . . Lacking the language, I concede that it is none of my business, and I am giving up on it."

LEWIS THOMAS

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meaning, not yet anyway. Lacking the language, I concede that it is none of my business, and I am giving up on it.

Biology is something else again, another matter, quite another matter indeed, in fact very likely another form, or at least another aspect of matter, probably not glimpsed, or anyway not yet glimpsable, by the mathematics of quantum physics.

One big difference is that biology, being a more difficult science, has lagged behind, so far behind that we have not yet reached the stage of genuine theory—in the predictive sense in which theoretical physics drives that field along. Biologists are still principally engaged in making observations and collecting facts, trying wherever possible to relate one set of facts to another but still lacking much of a basis for grand unifying theories. Evolution is about as close as we have come, and it is certainly a grand and sweeping concept, but more like a wonderful puzzle, filled with bits of information waiting for more bits before the whole matter can be fitted together. It remains, necessarily, an intensely reductionist field in science, requiring the scrutiny of endless details, and then the details of the details, before it will become possible to see a large, clear picture of the whole orderly process, and it will need decades of work, perhaps centuries, before we can stand back for a long look. It may even be that some of the information lies forever beyond our grasp because of the sheer age and volume of planetary life and the disappearance from the record of so many crucial forms, crucial for comprehending the course of events.

In fact, we can look back only a relatively short distance. Up until the 1950s, the fossil record, on which the most solid parts of the structure of evolutionary theory were based, provided a fairly close look at only the last five hundred million years or so. We now know, from the work of Barghoorn, Cloud, Schopf, and others, that there is a period of at least three billion years of life about which we know very little, and for most of that time the sole occupants of the earth were the prokaryotes—bacteria and, I have no doubt, their resident viruses. We tend to use words such as "early" and "primitive" for such creatures, as though we members of the eukaryote world, possessing nucleated cells and on

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the way to making brains for ourselves, comprise a qualitatively different and vastly superior form of life. We tend sometimes even to dismiss four-fifths of the earth's life span as a long, dull prologue to the *real* events in evolution, nothing but featureless, aimless bacteria around, waiting for the real show to begin.

It was probably not like that at all. Leave aside the excitement when the very first successful cell appeared, membranes, nucleic acid, ribosomes, proteins, and all, somewhere in a quiet pool, maybe in the aftermath of a lightning storm, maybe from a combination of energy sources: the sun, ionizing radiation, and volcanic heat. It can be told as a plausible story, easy to imagine, for all the necessary chemical building blocks were at hand (or came to hand) during the first billion years, and it should no longer come as a surprise that beautifully formed bacterial fossils exist in rocks 3.5 billion years old. I wish, by the way, that we had set up a better term—a *nicer* term—than "primordial soup" for the nutrients and clay surfaces in those early waters of the earth. "Soup" is somehow too dismissive a word for a state of affairs so immensely important, more like the role of the yolk in a fertilized egg (although that doesn't sound much better). Maybe it is an unexplored tradition in the language of science to flatten out the prose for really huge events: what may be turning out to be the most profound and subtle of all mechanisms in evolutionary genetics is now known, flatly and familiarly, as "jumping genes."

The first cell to appear on the planet was in all probability just that: a single first cell, capable of replicating itself, and a creature of great theoretical interest. But the events that followed over the next 2.5 billion or so years seem to me even more fascinating. It is entirely possible that the stretch of time was needed for the progeny of the first cell to learn virtually everything essential for getting on in a closed ecosystem. Long before the first great jump could be taken—the transformation of prokaryotes to eukaryotes around a billion years ago—a great many skills had to be acquired.

During those years, the life of the earth was of course made up of vast numbers of individual cells, each one replicating on its own, but it would have seemed to

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an outside observer more like a tissue, the differentiated parts of a huge organism, than a set of discrete beings. In most places, and in the algal mats that covered much of the earth's surface for a very long time, the microorganisms arranged themselves in neatly aligned layers, feeding one another in highly specialized ways and developing the mechanisms for cooperation and coordination that, I believe, have characterized the biosphere ever since.

Chemical messengers of precision and subtlety evolved during this stage, used no doubt for the allocation of space and the encouragement (or discouragement) of replication by neighboring microorganisms. Some of these chemical signals are still with us, but now they are emitted from specialized cells in the tissues of higher organisms, functioning as hormones. Insulin, for example, or a protein very similar to insulin with similar properties, is produced by strains of that famous and ancient bacterium, *E. coli*. Other bacteria are known to make a substance similar to human chorionic gonadotropin. Later, when protozoa and fungi evolved from their ancestral prokaryotes, they came equipped with ACTH, insulin, and growth hormone, all similar to their modern counterparts.

Moreover, the life of the planet began the long, slow process of modulating and regulating the physical conditions of the planet. The oxygen in today's atmosphere is almost entirely the result of photosynthetic living, which had its start with the appearance of blue-green algae among the microorganisms. It was very likely this first step—or evolutionary jump—that led to the subsequent differentiation into eukaryotic, nucleated cells, and there is almost no doubt that these new cells were pieced together by the symbiotic joining up of prokaryotes. The chloroplasts in today's green plants, which capitalize on the sun's energy to produce the oxygen in our atmosphere, are the lineal descendants of ancient blue-green algae. The mitochondria in all our cells, which utilize the oxygen for securing energy from plant food, are the progeny of ancient oxidative bacteria. Collectively, we are still, in a fundamental sense, a tissue of microbial organisms living off the sun, decorated and ornamented these

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days by the elaborate architectural structures that the microbes have constructed for their living quarters, including seagrass, foxes, and of course ourselves.

We can imagine three worlds of biology, corresponding roughly to the three worlds of physics: the very small world now being explored by the molecular geneticists and virologists, not yet as strange a place as quantum mechanics but well on its way to strangeness; an everyday, middle-sized world where things are as they are; and a world of the very large, which is the whole affair, the lovely conjoined biosphere, the vast embryo, the closed ecosystem in which we live as working parts, the place for which Lovelock and Margulis invented the term "Gaia" because of its extraordinary capacity to regulate itself. This world seems to me an even stranger one than the world of very small things in biology: it looks like the biggest organism I've ever heard of, and at the same time the most delicate and fragile, exactly the delicate and fragile creature it appeared to be in those first photographs taken from the surface of the moon. It is at this level of things that I find meaning in Wallace Stevens, although I haven't any idea that Stevens intended this in his "Man with the Blue Guitar": "they said, 'You have a blue guitar,/you do not play things as they are.'/The man replied, 'Things as they are/are changed upon the blue guitar.' " It is a long poem, alive with ambiguities, but it can be read, I think, as a tale of the earth itself.

Some biologists dislike the Lovelock-Margulis view of things, although they agree that the regulatory homeostasis of earth's life exists as a real phenomenon. They dislike the term "Gaia," for one thing, because of its possible religious undertones, and they dislike the notion of design that seems implicit—although one way out of that dilemma is to call the arrangement a "system" and then assert that this is the only way that complex "Systems" can survive, by endless chains of regulatory messages and intricate feedback loops. It is not necessary, in accounting for the evolution and now the stability of the earth's atmosphere, to suggest that evolution itself can plan ahead; all you need assume is the existence of close linkages of interdependency involving all

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existing forms of life, after the fashion of an organism. Finally, it is not a view of things, as has been claimed, that is likely to relieve human beings of any feeling of responsibility for the environment, backing them off from any concern for the whole place, on grounds that it runs itself and has done so, implacably, since long before we arrived on the scene. To the contrary, I should think it would have just the opposite effect, imposing a new feeling of anxiety for the environment everywhere. If you become convinced that you exist as a part of something that is itself alive, you are more likely to take pains not to do damage to the other vital parts around you.

Anyway, it seems to me a notion in biology not to be dismissed lightly, and requiring a great deal more thought and a lot more science. Part of the science can be done best by the technologies developed for space exploration. One thing discovered since NASA began its work, on which I should think almost everyone would now agree, is that by far the most interesting, engrossing, and puzzling object in the solar system—maybe in the whole galaxy—is our own planet. It needs more research, huge-

"Maybe it is an unexplored tradition in the language of science to flatten out the prose for really huge events: what may be turning out to be the most profound and subtle of all mechanisms in evolutionary genetics is now known, flatly and familiarly, as "jumping genes."

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scale and at the same time delicate, highly reductionist work, but in the meantime it is there for the humanists to think about, something new and amiable, a free gift from science and high technology, a nice piece of bewilderment for the poets, an instruction in humility for all the rest of us.

In the everyday middle-sized world where I live, biology has only begun to work. Medicine, the newest and youngest of all the sciences, bobs along in the wake of biology, indeed not yet sure that it *is* all that much a science, but certain that if there is to be a scientific future for medicine it can come only from basic biomedical research. I'm not sure who invented that convenient hybrid word "biomedical." I think it was someone from my professional side, wanting to lay claims on respectable science by the prefix "bio"; but it could as well have been a pure biologist wanting the suffix "medical" as a way to lay hands on NIH grants. Whichever, it is a nice word and it contains the truth: medicine is a branch of biological science for the long-term future.

This means that I am entitled, as a physician, to ask my biologist friends to answer a range of questions that are not yet perceived as an immediate part of my own bailiwick, just as they can expect me and my colleagues to turn up some quick answers to problems like cancer, coronary disease, schizophrenia, heartburn, whatever. Indeed, the only question I am inclined to turn aside as being impossible to respond to happens to be the one most often raised these days, not just by my biologist friends but by everyone: the question about stress, how to avoid stress, prevent stress, allay stress. I refuse to have anything to do with this matter, having made up my mind, from everything I have read or heard about it in recent years, that what people mean by stress is simply the condition of being human, and I will not recommend any meddling with that, by medicine or any other profession.

But I digress. What I wish to get at is an imaginary situation in which I am allowed three or four questions to ask the world of biomedical science to settle for me by research, as soon as possible. Can I make a short list of top-priority puzzles, things I am more puzzled by than anything else? I can.

First, I want to know what goes

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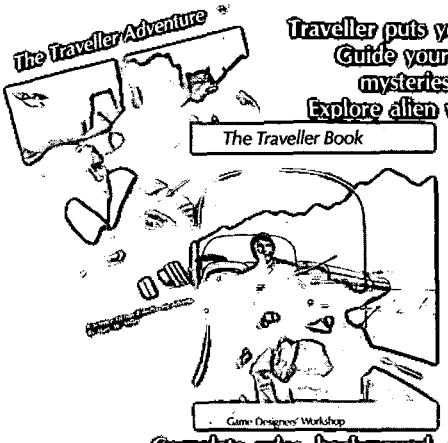

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on in the mind of a honeybee. Is it true, as is often asserted, that a bee is simply a small, neatly assembled robot, capable only of behaving in ways for which the bee is programmed by instructions in bee DNA, or is something else going on? In short, does a bee know what is going on in its mind when it navigates its way to distant food sources and back to the hive, using polarized sunlight and the tiny magnet it carries as a navigational aid? Or is the bee just a machine, unable to do its mathematics and dance its language in any other way? To use Donald Griffin's term, does a bee have "awareness"; or to use a phrase I like better, can a bee think and imagine?

There is an experiment for this, or at least an observation made long ago by Karl von Frisch and more recently confirmed by James Gould at Princeton. Biologists who wish to study such things as bee navigation, language, and behavior in general have to train their bees to fly from the hive to one or another special place. To do this, they begin by placing a source of sugar very close to the hive so that the bees (considered by their trainers to be very dumb beasts) can learn what the game is about. Then, at regular intervals, the dish or whatever is moved progressively farther and farther from the hive, in increments of about 25 percent at each move. Eventually, the target is being moved a hundred feet or more at a jump, very far from the hive. Sooner or later, while this process is going on, the biologist shifting the dish of sugar will find that his bees are out there waiting for him, precisely where the next position had been planned. This is an uncomfortable observation to make, harder still to explain in conventional terms: Why would bees be programmed for such behavior in their evolution? Flowers do not walk away in regular, predictable leaps. One possible explanation, put forward by Gould but with deep reservations and some doubt, is that bees are very smart animals who know what the biologist is up to and can imagine where he will turn up next with his sugar. Another posibility favored by Gould is that we simply do not understand the matter and need to learn more about bees. I like this answer, and it is my reason for putting the bee question at the top of my list.

My second question, addressed

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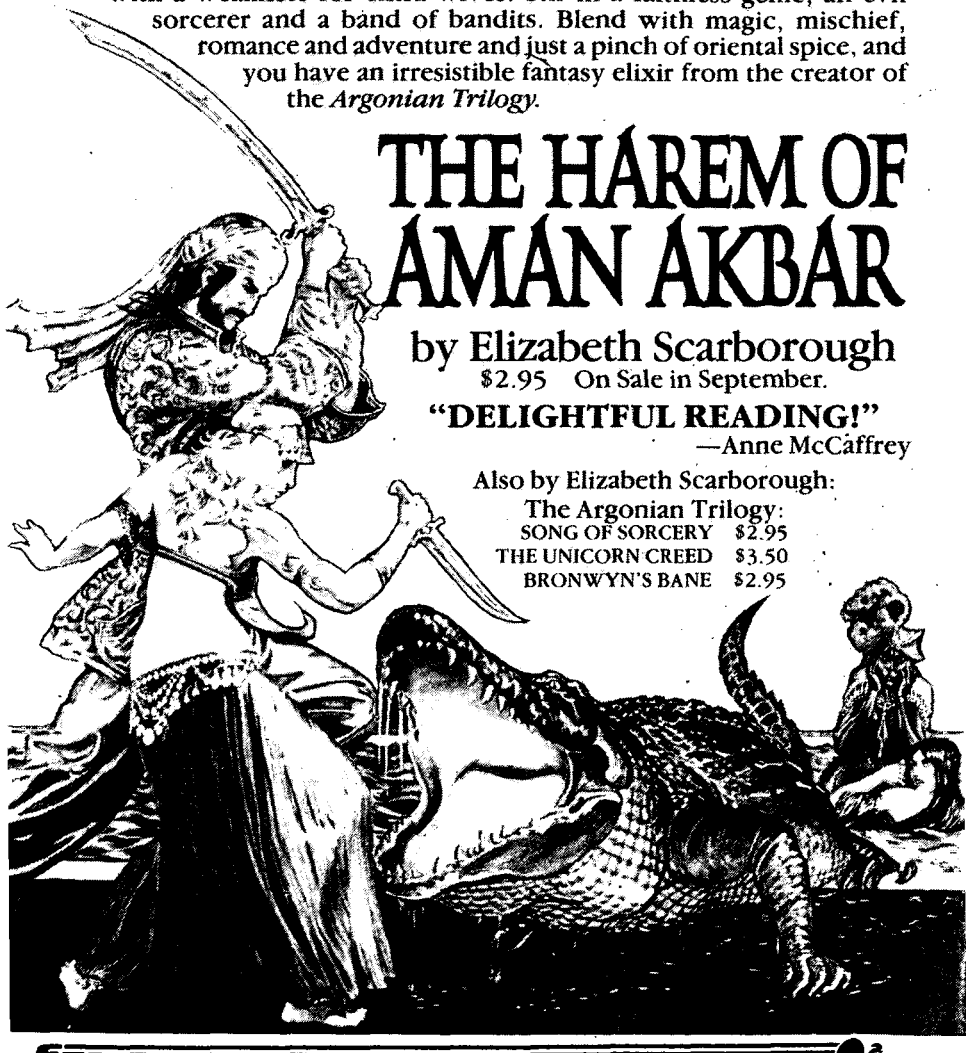

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at large to the world of biology, concerns music. Surely, music (along with ordinary language) is as profound a problem for human biology as can be thought of, and I would like to see something done about it. A few years ago the German government set a large advisory committee to work on the question of what the next Max Planck Institute should be taking on as its scientific mission. The committee worked for a very long time and emerged with the recommendation that the new Max Planck Institute should be dedicated to the problem of music—what music is, why it is indispensable for human existence, what music really means—hard questions like that. The government, in its wisdom, turned down the idea, muttering something in administrative language about relevance, and there the matter rests. I shall take it as a sign of growing-up in the United States when we can assemble a similar committee for the same purpose and have the idea of the National Institute of Music approved and funded. I will not wait up for this to happen, but I can imagine it starting on a very small scale and with a very limited mission and a modest budget: a narrow question, like Why is *The Art of Fugue* so important and what does this single piece of music do to the human mind? Later on, there will be other questions, harder to deal with.

And while you are on your feet, Science, I have one last question, this time one closer to medicine. Some years ago, Dr. Harold Wolff, professor of neurology at Cornell, conducted the following experiment. He hypnotized some healthy volunteer subjects, and while they were under deep hypnosis he touched their forearms with an ordinary pencil, which he told them was an extremely hot object; then he brought them out of the hypnotic state. In most cases, what happened was the prompt development of an area of redness and swelling at the skin site touched by the pencil, and in some subjects this went on to form a typical blister. I want to know all about that phenomenon. I also want to know how it happens that patients with intractable warts of long standing can have their warts instructed to drop off while under hypnosis.

Come to think of it, I would rather have a clear understanding of this phenomenon than anything else I

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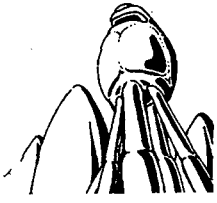
can think of at the moment. The bees and the music can wait. If it is true, as it seems to be, that the human central nervous system can figure out how to go about creating a blister at a particular skin site, all on its own, or how to instruct its blood vessels, lymphocytes and heaven knows what other participants in the tissues to eliminate a wart, then it is clear that the human nervous system has already evolved a vast distance beyond biomedical science. If I had a good wart I'd be happy to be a participant in this experiment, and I'll be glad any day to try my brain on a blister, but my motive for doing so would be less than worthy. If it worked I would feel gratified by the skill, excessively vain, and ready to dine out forever on the news that my own mind is so much smarter than I am. ●



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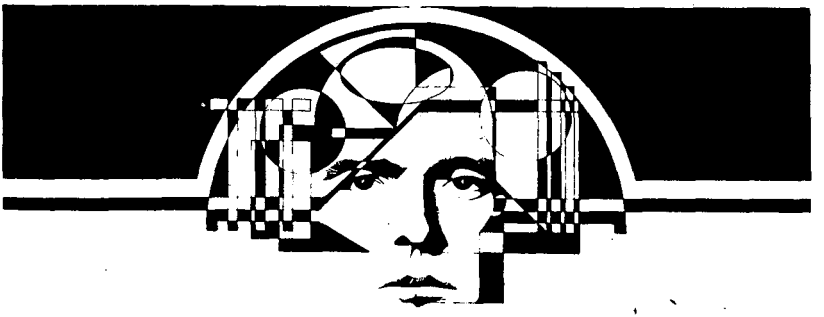

To vary our monthly fare, here are ten short problems with science fiction angles. A few call for some knowledge of physics, but most are easily solved if you have the right burst of insight. The answers are on page 94.

1. On what planet can you throw a rock in such a way that it goes a short distance, stops in midair, reverses direction, and travels back to you. No, it doesn't bounce off anything.

2. An astronaut exploring the moon bet his companion that with his eyes tightly closed he could walk a distance of exactly one kilometer. How did he win the bet?

3. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

4. In Lord Dunsany's *Fourth Book of Jorkens*, Jorkens insists that six months earlier he had made a trip through space to a spot in the solar system, on the other side of the sun, directly opposite where the earth is now. A skeptical member of the Billiards Club bets him five pounds he can't prove it. How does Jorkens win the bet?

5. Is there a structure on the earth, made by human hands, that can be seen with unaided eyes from the moon?

6. What colossal blunder pervades H. G. Wells's novel *The Invisible Man*?

7. In Ross Tocklynne's SF yarn, "At the Center of Gravity," some men are trapped at the center of a hollow sphere as large as the earth. The force of gravity has drawn them there. In Wells's *First Men in the Moon*,

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gravity pulls Wells's space travelers to the center of their spherical ship. What's wrong here?

8. Imagine an enormous gyroscope constructed on the equator. As the earth turns, the axis of the gyroscope will keep its orientation relative to the stars. Relative to the earth, however, the axis will make a complete rotation every 24 hours. Would this not be a form of perpetual motion, allowing useful energy to be taken from the rotating gyroscope?

9. Below are the numbers 1,2,3, and zero, with the 1 horizontal as it is often written in Japan. What well known magazine that publishes science fiction is represented by these four digits?

10. Diagrams can be sent easily over interstellar distances by a binary pulsed code that indicates which cells in a rectangular matrix are to be darkened. What message is conveyed by the matrix shown in Figure 1?

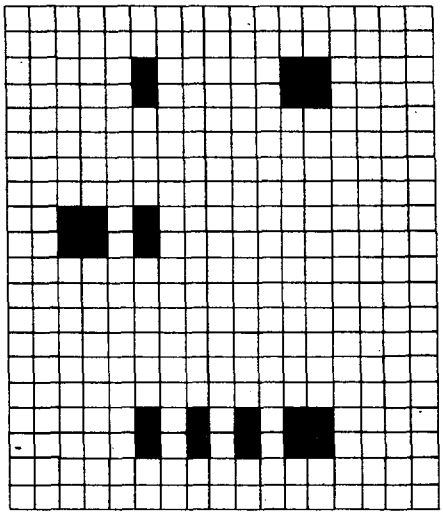

Figure 1

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by Frederik Pohl

THE KINDLY ISLE

Mr. Pohl says of this delightful tale: "The island of St. Maartens N.A. is not 'The Kindly Isle.' But it is kindly enough, in a stern world, especially when brightened by that least stern of professors, Betty Anne Hull. It was there, in the first week of the stern year of 1984, that I wrote this wishful story."

art: Nicholass Jainschigg

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I

The place they called the Starlight Casino was full of people, a tour group by their looks. I had a few minutes before my appointment with Mr. Kavilan, and sometimes you got useful bits of knowledge from people who had just been through the shops, the hotels, the restaurants, the beaches. Not this time, though. They were an incoming group, and ill-tempered. Their calves under the hems of the bright shorts were hairy ivory or bald, and all they wanted to talk about was lost luggage, unsatisfactory rooms, moldy towels and desk clerks who gave them the wrong keys. There were a surly couple of dozen of them clustered around a placatory tour representative in a white skirt and frilly green blouse. She was fine. It was gently, "We'll find it," to this one and sweetly, "I'll talk to the maid myself," to another, and I made a note of the name on her badge. Deirdre. It was worth remembering. Saints are highly valued in the hotel business. Then, when the bell captain came smiling into the room to tell me that Mr. Kavilan was waiting for me—and didn't have his hand out for a tip—I almost asked for his name, too. It was a promising beginning. If the island was really as "kindly" as they claimed, that would be a significant plus on my checklist.

Personnel was not my most urgent concern, though. My present task was only to check out the physical and financial aspects of a specific project. I entered the lobby and looked around for my real-estate agent—and was surprised when the beachcomber type by the breezeway stretched out his hand. "Mr. Wenright? I'm Dick Kavilan."

He was not what I expected. I knew that R. T. Kavilan was supposed to be older than I, and I took my twenty-year retirement from government service eight years ago. This man did not seem that old. His hair was blond and full, and he had an all-around-the-face blond beard that surrounded a pink nose, bronzed cheeks and bright blue eyes. He didn't think of himself as old, either, because all he had on was white ducks and sandals. He wore no shirt at all, and his body was as lean and tanned as his face. I had dressed for the tropics, too, but not in the same way: white shoes and calf-length white socks, pressed white shorts and a maroon T-shirt with the golden insignia of our Maui hotel over the heart. I understood what he meant when he glanced at my shoes and said, "We're informal here—I hope you don't mind." Formal he certainly was not.

He was, however, effortlessly efficient. He pulled his open Saab out of the cramped hotel lot, found a gap in the traffic, greeted two friends along the road and said to me, "It'll be slow going through Port, but once we get outside it's only twenty minutes to Keytown"—all at once.

"I've got all day," I said.

He nodded, taking occasional glances at me to judge what kind of a customer I was going to be. "I thought," he offered, "that you might want to make just a preliminary inspection this morning. Then there's a good restaurant in Keytown. We can have lunch and talk—what's the matter?"

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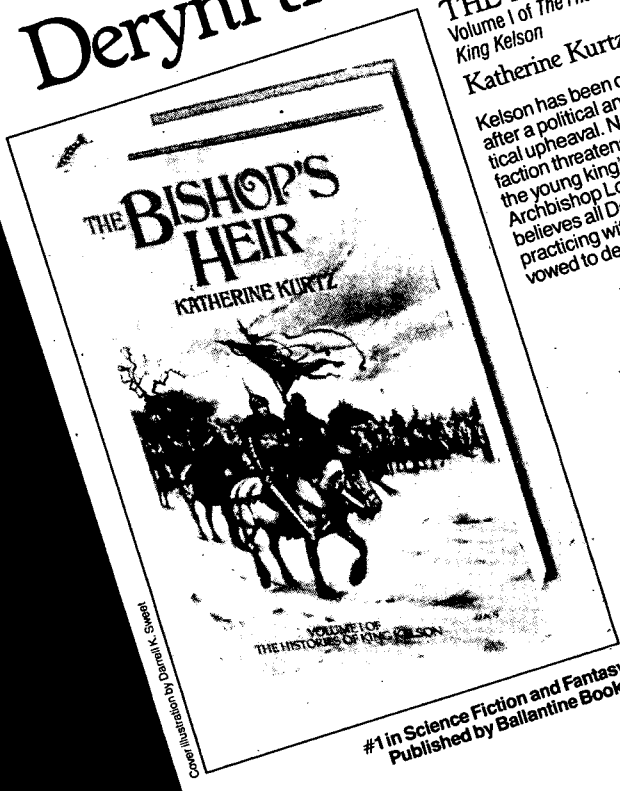

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I was craning my neck at a couple we had just passed along the road, a woman who looked like a hotel guest and a dark, elderly man. "Did you see somebody you wanted to talk to?"

We took a corner and I straightened up. "Not exactly," I said. Somebody I had once wanted to talk to? No. That wasn't right, either. Somebody I should have wanted to talk to once, but hadn't, really? Especially about such subjects as Retroviridae and the substantia nigra?

"If it was the man in the straw hat," said Kavilan, "that was Professor Michaelis. He the one?"

"I never heard of a Professor Michaelis," I said, wishing it were not a lie.

In the eight years since I took the hotel job I've visited more than my share of the world's beauty spots—Pago-Pago and the Costa Brava, Martinique and Lesbos, Bermuda, Kauai, Barbados, Tahiti. This was not the most breathtaking, but it surely was pretty enough to suit any tourist who ever lived. The beaches were golden and the water crystal. There were thousand-foot forested peaks, and even a halfway decent waterfall just off the road. In a lot of the world's finest places there turns out to be a hidden worm in the mangosteen—bribe-hungry officials, or revolutions simmering off in the bush, or devastating storms. According to Dick Kavilan, the island had none of those. "Then why did the Dutchmen give up?" I asked. It was a key question. A Rotterdam syndicate was supposed to have sunk fourteen million dollars into the hotel project I had come to inspect—and walked away when it was three-quarters built.

"They just ran out of money, Mr. Wenright."

"Call me Jerry, please," I said. That was what the preliminary report had indicated. Probably true. Tropical islands were a bottomless pit for the money of optimistic cold-country investors. If Marge had lived and we had done what we planned, we might have gone bust ourselves in Puerto Rico . . . if she had lived.

"Then, Jerry," he grinned, turning into a rutted dirt road I hadn't even seen, "we're here." He stopped the car and got out to unlock a chainlink gate that had not been unlocked recently. Nor had the road recently been driven. Palm fronds buried most of it and vines had reclaimed large patches.

Kavilan got back in the car, panting—he was not all that youthful, after all—and wiped rust off his hands with a bandanna. "Before we put up that fence," he said, "people would drive in or bring boats up to the beach at night and load them with anything they could carry. Toilets. Furniture. Windows, frames and all. They ripped up the carpets where they found any, and where there wasn't anything portable they broke into the walls for copper piping."

"So there isn't fourteen million dollars left in it," I essayed.

He let the grin broaden. "Look now, bargain later, Jerry. There's plenty left for you to see."

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There was, and he left me alone to see it. He was never so far away that I couldn't call a question to him, but he didn't hang himelf around my neck, either. I didn't need to ask many questions. It was obvious that what Kavilan (and the finders' reports) had said was true. The place had been looted, all right. It was capricious, with some sections apparently hardly touched. Some were hit hard. Paintings that had been screwed to the wall had been ripped loose—real oils, I saw from one that had been ruined and left. A marble dolphin fountain had been broken off and carted a few steps away—then left shattered on the walk.

I had come prepared with a set of builder's plans, and they showed me that there were to have been four hundred guest rooms, a dozen major function areas, bars and restaurants, an arcade of shops in the basement, a huge wine cellar under even that, two pools, a sauna—those were just the sections where principal construction had gone well along before the Dutchmen walked away. I saw as much of it as I could in two hours. When my watch said eleven-thirty I sat down on an intact stone balustrade overlooking the gentle breakers on the beach and waited for Kavilan to join me. "What about water availability?" I asked.

"A problem, Jerry," he agreed. "You'll need to lay a mile and a quarter of new mains to connect with the highway pipes, and then when you get the water it'll be expensive."

I wrinkled my nose. "What's that smell?"

He laughed. "Those are some of the dear departed of the island, I'm afraid, and that's another problem. Let's move on before we lose our taste for lunch."

Kavilan was as candid as I could have hoped, and a lot more so than I would have been in his place. It was an island custom, he said, to entomb their dead aboveground instead of burying them. Unfortunately the marble boxes were seldom watertight. The seepage I had smelled was a very big minus to the project, but Kavilan shook his head when I said so. He reached into the hip pocket of his jeans, unfolded a sweatproof wallet and took out a typed, three-page list.

I said he was candid. The list included all the things I would have asked him about:

Relocation of cemetery	$350,000	
New water mains, 1.77 miles	680,000	(10-inch)
	790,000	(12-inch)
Paving access road, 0.8 miles	290,000	
But it also included:		
Lien, Windward Isles Const. Co.	1,300,000	
(Settlement est.	605,000)	
Damage judgment, Sun/Sea Petro.	2,600,000	
(Settlement est.	350,000)	
Injunction, N.A. Trades Council		
(Est. cost to vacate	18,000)	

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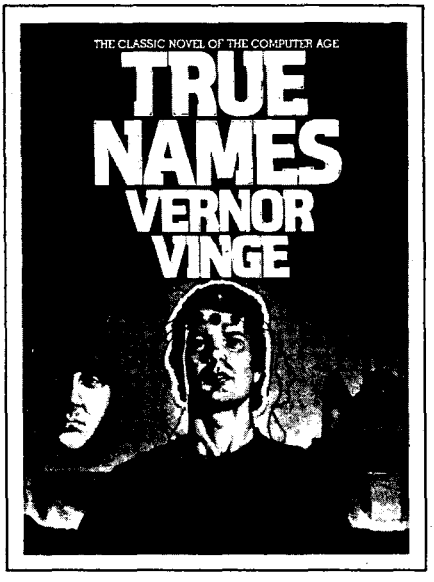

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The total on the three-page list, taking the estimated figures at face value, came to over three million dollars. Half the items on it I hadn't even suspected.

The first course was coming and I didn't want to ruin a good lunch with business, so I looked for permission, then pocketed the paper as the conch salad arrived. Kavilan was right. It was good. The greens were fresh, the chunks of meat chewed easily, the dressing was oil and vinegar but with some unusual additions that made it special. Mustard was easy to pick out, and a brush of garlic, but there were others. I thought of getting this chef's name, too.

And thought it again when I found that the escalope of veal was as good as the conch. The wine was even better, but I handled it sparingly. I didn't know Dick Kavilan well enough to let myself be made gullible by adding a lot of wine to a fine meal, a pretty restaurant and a magnificent view of a sun-drenched bay. We chatted socially until the demitasses came. How long had he been on the island? Only two years, he said, surprising me. When he added that he'd been in real estate in Michigan before that, I connected on the name. "Sellman and Kavilan," I said. "You put together the package on the Upper Peninsula for us." It was a really big, solid firm. Not the kind you take early retirement from.

"That's right," he said. "I liked Michigan. But then I came down here with some friends who had a boat—I'm a widower, my boys are grown—and then I only went back to Michigan long enough to sell out."

"Then there really is a lure of the islands."

"Why, that's what you're here to find out, Jerry," he said, the grin back again. "How about you? Married?"

"I'm a widower too," I said, and touched my buttoned pocket. "Are these costs solid?"

"You'll want to check them out for yourself but, yes, I think so. Some are firm bids. The others are fairly conservative estimates." He waved to the waiter, who produced cigars. Cuban Perfectos. When we were both puffing, he said, "My people will put in writing that if the aggregate costs go more than twenty percent over that list we'll pay one-third of the excess as forfeit." Now, that was an interesting offer! I didn't agree to it, not even a nod, but at that point Kavilan didn't expect me to. "When the Dutchman went bust," he added, "that list added up to better than nine million."

No wonder he went bust! "How come there's a six million dollar difference?"

He waved his cigar. "That was seven years ago. I guess people were meaner then. Or maybe the waiting wore the creditors down. Well. What's your pleasure for this afternoon, Jerry? Another look at the site, or back to Port?"

"Port, I think," I said reluctantly.

The idea of spending an afternoon on the telephone and visiting gov-

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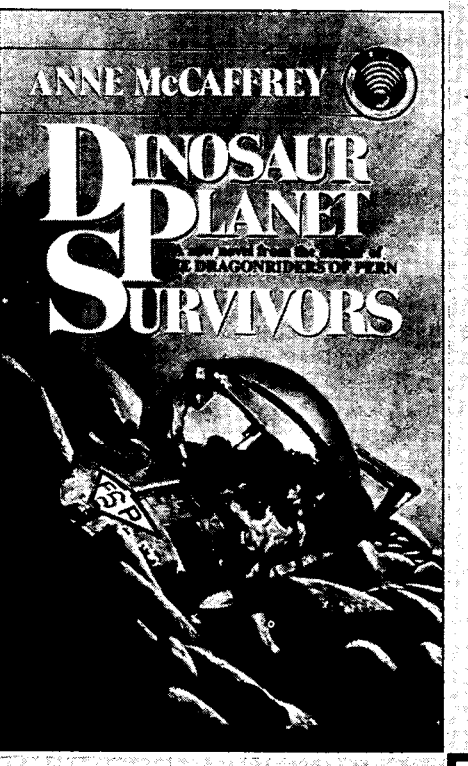

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ernment offices seemed like a terrible waste of a fine day, but that was what they paid me for.

It kept me busy. As far as I could check, the things Kavilan had told me were all true, and checking was surprisingly easy. The government records clerks were helpful, even when they had to pull out dusty files, and all the people who said they'd return my calls did. It wasn't such a bad day. But then it wasn't the days that were bad.

I put off going to bed as long as I could, with a long, late dinner, choosing carefully between the local lobster and what the headwaiter promised would be first-rate prime rib. He was right; the beef was perfect. Then I put a quarter into every fifth slot machine in the hotel casino as long as my quarters held out; but when the light by my bed was out and my head was on the pillow the pain moved in. There was a soft Caribbean moon in the window and the sound of palms rustling in the breeze. They didn't help. The only question was whether I would cry myself to sleep. I still did that, after eight years, about one night in three, and this was a night I did.

II

I thought if I had an early breakfast I'd have the dining room to myself, so I could do some serious thinking about Val Michaelis. I was wrong. The tour group had a trip in a glass-bottomed boat that morning and the room was crowded; the hostess apologetically seated me with a young woman I had seen before. We'd crossed paths in the casino as we each got rid of our cups of quarters. Hair to her shoulders, no makeup—I'd thought at first she was a young girl, but in the daylight that was revised by a decade or so. She was civil—civilly silent, except for a "Good morning" and now and then a "May I have the marmalade?"—and she didn't blow smoke in my face until we were both onto our second cups of coffee. If the rest of her tour had been as well-schooled as she it would have been a pleasant meal. Some of them were all right, but the table for two next to us was planning a negligence suit over a missing garment bag, and the two tables for four behind us were exchanging loud ironies about the bugs they'd seen, or thought they had seen, in their rooms. When she got up she left with a red-haired man and his wife—one of the more obnoxious couples present, I thought, and felt sorry for her.

Kavilan had given me the gate key, and the bell captain found me a car rental. I drove back to the hotel site. This time I took a notebook, a hammer, a Polaroid and my Swiss Army knife.

Fortunately the wind was the other way this morning and the aromatic reminders of mortality were bothering some other part of the shoreline. Before going in I walked around the fence from the outside, snapping pictures of the unfinished buildings from several angles. Funny thing. Pushing my way through some overgrown vines I found a section of the fence where the links had been carefully severed with bolt-cutters. The cuts were not fresh, and the links had been rubbed brighter than the rest

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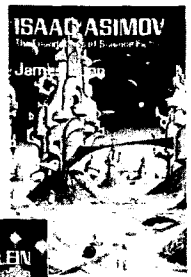

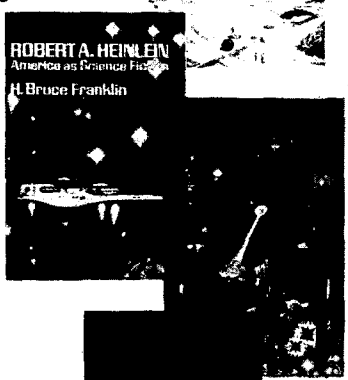

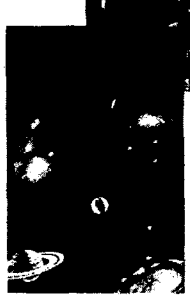

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of the fence; somebody had been getting through anyway, no doubt to pick up a few souvenirs missed by his predecessors. The vines had not grown back, so it had been used fairly recently. I made a note to have Kavilan fix that right away; I didn't want my inventory made obsolete as soon as I was off the island.

One wing had been barely begun. The foundations were half full of rain water, but tapping with the hammer suggested the cementwork was sound, and a part where pouring had not been finished showed good iron-bar reinforcement. In the finished wing, the vandalism was appalling but fairly superficial in all but a dozen rooms. A quarter of a million dollars would finish it up, plus furnishings. Some of the pool tiles were cracked—deliberately, it seemed—but most of the fountains would be all right once cleaned up. The garden lighting fixtures were a total writeoff.

The main building had been the most complete and also the most looted and trashed. It might take half a million dollars to fix the damage, I thought, adding up the pages in my notebook. But it was much more than a half-million-dollar building. There were no single rooms there, only guest suites, every one with its own balcony overlooking the blue bay. There was a space for a ballroom, a space for a casino, a pretty, trellised balcony for a top-floor bar—the design was faultless. So was what existed of the workmanship. I couldn't find the wine cellar, but the shop level just under the lobby was a pleasant surprise. Some of the shop windows had been broken, but the glass had been swept away and it was the only large area of the hotel without at least one or two piles of human feces. If all the vandals had been as thoughtful as the ones in the shopping corridor, there might have been no need to put up the fence.

About noon I drove down to a little general store—"Li Tsung's Supermarket," it called itself—and got materials for a sandwich lunch. I spent the whole day there, and by the time I was heading back to the hotel I had just about made up my mind: the site was a bargain, taken by itself.

Remained to check out the other factors.

My title in the company is Assistant International Vice President for Finance. I was a financial officer when I worked at the government labs, and money is what I know. You don't really know about money unless you know how to put a dollar value on all the things your money buys, though, so I can't spend all my time with the financial reports and the computer. When I recommend an acquisition I have to know what comes with it.

So, besides checking out the hotel site and the facts that Kavilan had given me, I explored the whole island. I drove the road from the site to the airport three times—once in sunlight, once in rain and once late at night—counting up potholes and difficult turns to make sure it would serve for a courtesy van. Hotel guests don't want to spend all their time in their hotels. They want other things to go to, so I checked out each of the island's fourteen other beaches. They want entertainment at night,

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so I visited three discos and five other casinos—briefly—and observed, without visiting, the three-story verandahed building demurely set behind high walls and a wrought-iron gate that was the island's officially licensed house of prostitution. I even signed up for the all-island guided bus tour to check for historical curiosities and points of interest and I did not, even once, open the slim, flimsy telephone directory to see if there was a listing for Valdos E. Michaelis, Ph.D.

The young woman from the second morning's breakfast was on the same tour bus and once again she was alone. Or wanted to be alone. Halfway around the island we stopped for complimentary drinks, and when I got back on the bus she was right behind me. "Do you mind if I sit here?" she asked.

"Of course not," I said politely, and didn't ask why. I didn't have to. I'd seen the college kid in the tank top and cutoffs earnestly whispering in her ear for the last hour, and just before we stopped for drinks he gave up whispering and started bullying.

I had decided I didn't like the college kid either, so that was a bond. The fact that we were both loners and not predatory about trying to change that was another. Each time the bus stopped for a photo opportunity we two grabbed quick puffs on our cigarettes instead of snapping pictures—smokers are an endangered species, and that's a special bond these days—so it was pretty natural that when I saw her alone again at breakfast the next morning I asked to join her. And when she looked envious at what I told her I was going to do that day, I invited her along.

Among the many things that Marge's death has made me miss is someone to share adventures with—little adventures, the kind my job keeps requiring of me, like chartering a boat to check out the hotel site from the sea. If Marge had lived to take these trips with me I would be certain I had the very best job in the world. Well, it is the best job in the world, anyway; it's the world that isn't as good any more.

The *Esmeralda* was a sport-fishing boat that doubled as a way for tourists to get out on the wet part of the world for fun. It was a thirty-footer, with a 200-horsepower outboard motor and a cabin that contained a V-shaped double berth up forward, and a toilet and galley amidships. It also came with a captain named Ildo, who was in fact the whole crew. His name was Spanish, he said he was Dutch, his color was assorted and his accent was broad Islands. When I asked him how business was he said, "Aw, slow, mon, but when it comes January—" he said "Johnerary"—"it'll be *good*." And he said it grinning to show he believed it, but the grin faded. I knew why. He was looking at my face, and wondering why his charter this day didn't seem to be enjoying himself.

I was trying, though. The *Esmeralda* was a lot too much like the other charter boat, the *Princess Peta*, for me to be at ease, but I really was doing my best to keep that other boat out of my mind. It occurred to me to wonder if, somewhere in my subconscious, I had decided to invite this

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Edna Buckner along so that I would have company to distract me on the *Esmeralda*. It then occurred to me that, if that was the reason, my subconscious was a pretty big idiot. Being alone on the boat would have been bad. Being with a rather nice-looking woman was worse.

The bay was glassy, but when we passed the headland light we were out in the swell of the ocean. I went back to see how my guest was managing. Even out past shelter the sea was gentle enough, but as we were traveling parallel to the waves there was some roll. It didn't seem to bother Edna Buckner at all. As she turned toward me she looked nineteen years again, and I suddenly realized why. She was enjoying herself. I didn't want to spoil that for her, and so I sat down beside her, as affable and charming as I knew how to be.

She wasn't nineteen. She was forty-one and, she let me know without exactly saying, unmarried, at least at the moment. She wasn't exactly traveling alone; she was the odd corner of a threesome with her sister and brother-in-law. They (she let me know, again without actually saying) had decided on the trip in the hope that it would ease some marital difficulties—and then damaged that project's chance of success by inviting a third party. "They were just sorry for me," said Edna, without explaining.

Going over the tour group in my mind, I realized I knew which couple she was traveling with. "The man with red hair," I guessed, and she nodded.

"And with the disposition to match. You should have heard him in the restaurant last night, complaining because Lucille's lobster was bigger than his." Actually, I had. "I will say," she added, "that he was in a better mood this morning. He even apologized, and he can be a charmer when he chooses. But I wish the trip were over. I've had enough fighting to last me the rest of my life."

She paused and looked at me speculatively for a moment. She was swaying slightly in the roll of the boat, rather nicely as a matter of fact. I started to open my mouth to change the subject but she shook her head. "Do you mind letting your shipmates tell you their troubles, Jerry?"

I happen to be a pretty closed-up person—more so since what happened to Marge. I didn't know whether I minded or not; there were not very many people who had offered to weep on my shoulder in the past eight years. She didn't wait for an answer, but went on with a rush: "I know it's no fun to listen to other people's problems, but I kind of need to say it out loud. Bert was an alcoholic—my husband. Ex-husband. He beat me up about once a week, for ten years. It took me all that time to make up my mind to leave him and so, when you think about it, I seem to be about ten years behind the rest of the world, trying to learn how to be a grown-up woman."

It obviously cost her something to say that. For a moment I thought she was going to cry, but she smiled instead. "So if I'm a little peculiar, that's why," she said, "and thank you for this trip. I can feel myself getting less peculiar every minute!"

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Money's my game, not inter-personal relationships, and I didn't have the faintest idea of how to react to this unexpected intimacy. Fortunately, my arm did. I leaned forward and put it around her shoulder for a quick, firm hug. "Maybe we'll both get less peculiar," I said, and just then Ildo called from the wheel:

"Mon? We're comin' up on you-ah bay!"

The hotel site looked even more beautiful from the water than it had from the land. There was a pale half-moon of beach that reached from one hill on the south to another at the northern end, and a white collar of breaking wavelets all its length. The water was crystal. When Ildo dropped anchor I could follow the line all twenty-odd feet to the rippled sand bottom. The only ugliness was the chain-link fence that marched around the building site itself.

The bay was not quite perfect. It was rather shallow from point to point, so that wind-surfing hotel guests who ventured more than a hundred yards out might find themselves abruptly in stronger seas. But that was a minor problem. Very few tourists would be able to stay on the boards long enough to go a hundred yards in any direction at all. The ones who might get out where they would be endangered would have the skills to handle it. And there was plenty of marine life for snorkelers and scuba-divers to look at. Ildo showed us places in under the rocky headlands where lobsters could be caught. "Plenty now," he explained. "Oh, mon, six year ago was *bad*. No lobster never, but they all come back now."

The hotel, I observed, had been intelligently sited. It wasn't dead center in the arc of the bay, but enough around the curve toward the northern end so that every one of the four hundred private balconies would get plenty of sun: extra work for the air-conditioners, but satisfied guests. The buildings were high enough above the water to be safe from any likely storm surf—and anyway, I had already established, storms almost never struck the island from the west. And there was a rocky outcrop on the beach just at the hotel itself. That was where the dock would go, with plenty of water for sport-fishing boats—there were plenty of sailfish, tuna and everything else within half an hour's sail, Ildo said. The dock could even handle a fair-sized private yacht without serious dredging.

While I was putting all this in my notebook, Edna had borrowed mask and flippers from Ildo's adequate supply and was considerately staying out of my way. It wasn't just politeness. She was obviously enjoying herself.

I, on the other hand, was itchily nervous. Ildo assured me there was nothing to be nervous about; she was a strong swimmer, there were no sharks or barracuda likely to bother her, she wasn't so far from the boat that one of us couldn't have jumped in after her at any time. It didn't help. I couldn't focus on the buildings through the finder of the Polaroid for more than a couple of seconds without taking a quick look to make sure she was all right.

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Actually there were other reasons for looking at her. She was at home in the water and looked good in it. Edna was not in the least like Marge—tall where Marge had been tiny, hair much darker than Marge's maple-syrup head. And of course a good deal younger than Marge had been even when I let her die.

It struck me as surprising that Edna was the first woman in years I had been able to look at without wishing she were Marge. And even more surprising that I could think of the death of my wife without that quick rush of pain and horror. When Edna noticed that I had put my camera and notebook away she swam back to the boat and let me help her aboard. "God," she said, grinning, "I needed that." And then she waved to the northern headland and said, "I just realized that the other side of that hill must be where my old neighbor lives."

I said, "I didn't know you had friends on the island."

"Just one, Jerry. Not a friend, exactly. Sort of an honorary uncle. He used to live next door to my parents' house in Maryland, and we kept in touch—in fact, he's the one that made me want to come here, in his letters. Val Michaelis."

III

Ildo offered us grilled lobsters for lunch. While he took the skiff and a face mask off to get the raw materials and Edna retreated to the cabin to change, I splashed ashore. He had brought the *Esmeralda* close in, and I could catch a glimpse of Edna's face in the porthole as she smiled out at me, but I wasn't thinking about her. I was thinking about something not attractive at all, called "bacteriological warfare."

Actually the kind of warfare we dealt with at the labs wasn't bacteriological. Bacteria are too easy to kill with broad-spectrum antibiotics. If you want to make a large number of people sick and want them to stay sick long enough to be no further problem, what you want is a virus.

That was the job Val Michaelis had walked away from.

I had walked away from the same place not long after him, and likely for very similar reasons—I didn't like what was happening there. But there was a difference. I'm an orderly person. I had put in for my twenty-year retirement and left with the consent, if not the blessing, of the establishment. Val Michaelis simply left. When he didn't return to the labs from vacation, his assistant went looking for him at his house. When the house turned up empty, others had begun to look. But by then Michaelis had had three weeks to get lost in. The search was pretty thorough, but he was never found. After a few years, no doubt, the steam had gone out of it, as new lines of research outmoded most of what he had been working on. That was a nasty enough business. I wasn't a need-to-knower and all I ever knew of it was an occasional slip. That was more than I wanted, though. Now and then I would spend an hour or two in the public library to make sure I'd got the words right, and try to figure how to put them together, and I think I had at least the right general

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idea. There are these things called oncoviruses, a whole family of them. One kind seems to cause leukemia. A couple of others don't seem to bother anybody but mice. But another kind, what they called "type D," likes monkeys, apes and human beings; and that was what Michaelis was working on. At first I thought he was trying to produce a weapon that would cause cancer and that didn't seem sensible—cancers take too long to develop to be much help on a battlefield. Then I caught another phrase: "substantia nigra." The library told me that that was a small, dark mass of cells way inside the brain. The substantia nigra's A9 cells control the physical things you learn to do automatically, like touch-typing or riding a bike; and near them are the A10 cells, which do something to control emotions. None of that helped me much, either, until I heard one more word:

Schizophrenia.

I left the library that day convinced that I was helping people develop a virus that would turn normal people into psychotics.

Later on—long after Val had gone AWOL and I'd gone my own way—some of the work was declassified, and the open literature confirmed part, and corrected part. There was still a pretty big question of whether I understood all I was reading, but it seemed that what the oncovirus D might do was to mess up some dopamine cells in and around the substantia nigra, producing a condition that was not psychotic exactly, but angry, tense, irresponsible—the sort of thing you hear about in kids that have burned their brains out with amphetamines. And the virus wouldn't reproduce in any mammals but primates. They couldn't infect any insects at all. Without rats or mice or mosquitoes or lice to carry it, how do you spread that kind of disease? True, they could have looked for a vector among, say, the monotremes or the marsupials—but how are you going to introduce a herd of sick platypuses into the Kremlin?

Later on, I am sure, they found meaner and easier bugs; but that was the one Michaelis and I had run away from. And nobody had seen Val Michaelis again—until I did, from Dick Kavilan's Saab.

Of course, Michaelis had more reason to quit than I did, and far more reason to hide. I only made up the payrolls and audited the bills. He did the molecular biology that turned laboratory cultures into killers.

The lobsters were delicious, split and broiled over a driftwood fire. Ildo had brought salad greens and beer from Port, and plates to eat it all on. China plates, not paper, and that was decent of him—he wasn't going to litter the beauty of the beach.

While we were picking the last of the meat out of the shells Edna was watching me. I was doing my best to do justice to the lunch, but I don't suppose I was succeeding. Strange sensation. I wasn't unhappy. I wasn't unaware of the taste of the lobster, or the pleasure of Edna's company, or the charm of the beach. I was very nearly happy, in a sort of basic, background way, but there were nastinesses just outside that gentle

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sphere of happiness, and they were nagging at me. I had felt like that before, time and again, in fact; most often when Marge and I were planning what to do with my retirement, and it all seemed rosy except for the constant sting of knowing the job I would have to finish first. The job was part of it now, or Val Michaelis was, and so was the way Marge died, and the two of them were spoiling what should have been perfection. Edna didn't miss what was going on, she simply diagnosed it wrong. "I guess I shouldn't have dumped my troubles on you, Jerry," she said, as Ildo picked up the plates and buried the ashes of the fire.

"Oh, no," I said. "No, it's not that—I'm glad you told me." I was, though I couldn't have said why, exactly; it was not a habit of mine to want that kind of intimacy from another person, because I didn't want to offer them any of mine. I said, "It's Val Michaelis."

She nodded. "He's in some kind of trouble? I thought it was strange that he'd bury himself here."

"Some kind," I agreed. "Or was. Maybe it's all over now." And then I made my decision. "I'd like to go see him."

"Oh," said Edna, "I don't know if he's still on the island."

"Why not?"

"He said he was leaving. He's been planning to for some time—he only stayed on to see us. What's this, Friday? The last time I saw him was Tuesday, and he was packing up then. He may be gone."

And he was. When Ildo deposited us at the Keytown dock and the taxi took us to the arartments where Michaelis had lived, the door of his place was unlocked. The rented furniture was there, but the closets were empty, and so were the bureau drawers, and of an occupant the only sign remaining was an envelope addressed to Edna:

> I thought I'd better leave while Gerald was still wrestling with his conscience. If you see him, thank him for the use of his space—and I hope we'll meet again in a couple of years.

Edna looked up at me in puzzlement. "Do you know what that part about your space means?"

I gave the note back to her and watched her fold it up and put it in her bag. I thought of asking her to burn it, but that would just make it more important to her. I wanted her to forget it. I said, "No," which was somewhat true. I didn't *know*. And I surely didn't want to guess.

By the time we were back on the boat I was able to be cheerful again, at least on the surface. When we docked at our own hotel Edna went on ahead to change, while I sent Ildo happily off with a big tip. He was, Edna had said, a pretty sweet man. He was not alone in that; nearly everyone I'd met on the island was as kindly as the island claimed; and it hurt me to think of Val Michaelis going on with his work in this gentle place.

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We had agreed to meet for a drink before dinner—we had taken it for granted that we were going to have dinner together—and when I came to Edna's room to pick her up she invited me in. "That Starlight Casino is pretty noisy, Jerry, and I've got this perfectly beautiful balcony to use up. Can you drink gin and tonic?"

"My very favorite," I said. That wasn't true. I didn't much like the taste of quinine water, or of gin, either, but sitting on a warm sunset balcony with Edna was a lot more attractive than listening to rockabilly music in the bar.

But I wasn't good company. Seeing Edna off by herself in the bay had set off one set of memories, Val Michaelis's note had triggered another. I didn't welcome either train of thought, because they were intruders; I was feeling almost happy, almost at peace—and those two old pains kept coming in to remind me of misery and fear. I did my best. Edna had set out glasses, bottles, a bucket of ice, a plate of things to nibble on, and the descending sun was perfect. "This is really nice, Marge," I said, accepting a refill of my glass . . . and only heard myself when I saw the look on her face.

"I mean Edna," I said.

She touched my hand when she gave the glass back to me. "I think that's a compliment, Jerry," she said sweetly.

I thought that over. "I guess it is," I said. "You know, I've never done that before. Called someone else by my wife's name, I mean. Of course, I haven't often been in the sort of situation where—" I stopped there, because it didn't seem right to define what I thought the present "situation" was.

She started to speak, hesitated, took a tiny sip of her drink, started again, stopped and finally laughed—at herself, I realized. "Jerry," she said, "you can tell me to mind my own business if you want to, because I know I ought to. But you told me your wife died eight years ago. Are you saying you've never had a private drink with a woman since then?"

"Well, no—it has happened now and then," I said, and then added honestly, "but not very often. You see—"

I stopped and swallowed. The expression on her face was changing, the smile softening. She reached out to touch my hand.

And then I found myself telling her the whole thing.

Not the *whole* whole thing. I did not tell her what the surfboard looked like, with the ragged half-moon gap in the side, and I didn't tell her what Marge's body had looked like—what was left of it—when at last they found it near the shore, eight days later. But I told her the rest. Turning in my retirement papers. The trip to California to see her folks. The boat. The surfboard. Marge paddling around in the swell, just before the breakers, while I watched from the boat. "I went down below for just a minute," I said, "and when I came back on deck she was gone. I could still see the surfboard, but she wasn't there. I hadn't heard a thing, although she must have—"

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"Oh, Jerry," said Edna.

"It has to do with water temperatures," I explained, "and with the increase in the seal population. The great white shark didn't used to come up that far north along the coast, but the water's a little warmer, and there are more seals. That's what they live on. Seals, and other things. And from a shark's view underwater, you see, a person lying on a surfboard, with his arms and legs paddling over the side, looks a lot like a seal. . . ."

I saw to my surprise that she was weeping. I shouldn't have been surprised. As I reached forward and put my arms around her, I discovered that I was weeping, too.

That was the biggest surprise of all. I'd done a lot of weeping in eight years, but never once in the presence of another human being, not even the shrinks I'd gone to see. And when the weeping stopped and the kissing began I found that it didn't seem wrong at all. It seemed very right, and a long, long time overdue.

IV

My remaining business with Dick Kavilan didn't take long. By the time Edna's tour group was scheduled to go home, I was ready, too.

The two of us decided not to wait for the bus to the airport. We went early, by taxi, beating the tours to the check-in desk. By the time the first of them arrived we were already sitting at the tiny bar, sipping farewell pina coladas. Only it was not going to be a farewell, not when I had discovered she lived only a few miles from the house I had kept all these years as home base.

When the tour buses began to arrive I could not resist preening my forethought a little. "That's going to be a really ugly scene, trying to check in all at once," I said wisely.

But really it wasn't. There were all the ingredients for a bad time, more than three hundred tired tourists trying to get seat assignments from a single airline clerk. But they didn't jostle. They didn't snarl, at her or each other. The tiny terminal was steamy with human bodies, but it almost seemed they didn't even sweat. They were singing and smiling—even Edna's sister and brother-in-law. They waved up at us, and it looked like their marriage had a good shot at lasting a while longer, after all.

A sudden gabble from the line of passengers told us what the little callboard confirmed a moment later. Our airplane had arrived from the States. Edna started to collect her bag, her sack of duty-free rum, her boots and fur-collared coat for the landing at Dulles, her little carry-on with the cigarettes and the book to read on the flight, her last-minute souvenir T-shirt . . . "Hold on," I said. "We've got an hour yet. They've got to disembark the arrivals and muck out the plane—you didn't think we'd leave on time, did you?"

So there was time for another pina colada, and while we were drinking

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them the newcomers began to straggle off the DC-10. The noise level in the terminal jumped fifteen decibels, and most of it was meal complaints, family arguments and clamor over lost luggage. The departing crowd gazed at their fretful replacements good-humoredly.

And all of a sudden that other unpleasant train of thought bit down hard. There was a healing magic on the island, and the thought of Val Michaelis doing the sort of thing he was trained to do here was more than I could bear. I hadn't turned Michaelis in, because I thought he was a decent man. But damaging these kind, gentle people was indecent.

I put down my half-finished drink, stood up and dropped a bill on the table. "Edna," I said, "I just realize there's something I have to do. I'm afraid I'm going to miss this flight. I'll call you in Maryland when I get back—I'm sorry."

And I really was. Very. But that did not stop me from heading for the phone.

The men from the NSA were there the next morning. Evidently they hadn't waited for a straight-through flight. Maybe they'd chartered one, or caught a light flight to a nearby island.

But they hadn't wasted any time.

They could have thanked me for calling them, I thought. They didn't. They invited me out to their car for privacy—it was about as much of an "invitation" as a draft notice is, and as difficult to decline—while I answered their questions. Then they pulled out of the hotel lot and drove those thirty-mile-an-hour island roads at sixty. We managed not to hit any of the cows and people along the way. We did, I think, score one hen. The driver didn't even slow down to look.

I was not in the least surprised. I didn't know the driver, but the other man was Joe Mooney. Now he was a full field investigator, but he had been a junior security officer at the labs when Michaelis walked away. He was a mean little man with a high opinion of himself; he had always thought that the rules he enforced on the people he surveilled didn't have to apply to him. He proved it. He turned around in the front seat, arm across the back, so he could look at me while ostensibly talking to his partner at the wheel: "You know what Michaelis was working on? Some kind of a bug to drive the Russians nuts."

"Mooney, watch it!" his partner snapped.

"Oh, it's all right. Old Jerry knows all about it, and he's cleared—or used to be."

"It wasn't a bug," I said. "It was a virus. It wouldn't drive them crazy. It would work on the brain to make them irritable and nasty—a kind of personality change, like some people get after a stroke. And he didn't just try. He succeeded."

"And then he ran."

"And then he ran, yes."

"Only it didn't work," grinned Mooney, "because they couldn't find a

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way to spread it. And now what we have to worry about, we have to worry that while he was down here he figured out how to make it work and's looking for a buyer. Like a Russian buyer."

Well, I could have argued all of that. But the only part I answered, as we stopped to unlock the chain-link gate, was the last part. And all I said was, "I don't think so."

Mooney laughed out loud. "You always were a googoo," he said. "You sure Michaelis didn't stick you with some of that stuff in reverse?"

I hadn't been able to find the entrance of the wine cellar, but that pair of NSA men had no trouble at all. They realized at once that there had to be a delivery system to the main dining room—I hadn't thought of that. So that's where they went, and found a small elevator shaft that went two stories down. There wasn't any elevator, but there were ropes and Mooney's partner climbed down while Mooney and I went back to the shopping floor. About two minutes after we got there a painters' scaffold at the end of the hall went over with a crash, and the NSA man pushed his way out of the door it had concealed. Mooney gave me a contemptuous look. "Fire stairs," he explained. "They had to be there. There has to be another entrance, too—outside—so they can deliver the wine by truck."

He was right again. From the inside it was easy to spot, even though we had only flashlights to see what we were doing. When Mooney pushed it open we got a flood of tropical light coming in, and a terrible smell to go with it. For a moment I wondered if the graveyard wind had shifted again, but it was only a pile of garbage—rotted garbage—long-gone lobster shells and sweepings from the mall and trash of all kinds. It wasn't surprising no one had found the entrance from outside; the stink was discouraging.

No matter what else I was, I was still a man paid to do a job by his company. So while the NSA team were prodding and peering and taking flash pictures, I was looking at the cellar. It was large enough to handle all the wines a first-class sommelier might want to store; the walls were solid, and the temperature good. With that outside door kept closed, it would be no problem to keep any vintage safely resting here. The Dutchman shouldn't have given up so easily, just because he was faced with a lot of lawsuits—but maybe, as Dick Kavilan had said, people were meaner then.

I blinked when Joe Mooney poked his flashlight in my face. "What are you daydreaming about?" he demanded.

I pushed his hand away. "Have you seen everything you need?" I asked.

He looked around. There wasn't a whole lot to see, really. Along one wall there were large glass tanks—empty, except for a scummy inch or two of liquid at the bottom of some of them, fishy smelling and unappetizing. There were smaller tanks on the floor, and marks on the rubber tile to show where other things had been that now were gone. "He took

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everything that matters out," he grumbled. "Son of a bitch! He got clean away."

"We'll find him," his partner said.

"Damn right, but what was he doing here? Trying out his stuff on the natives?" Mooney looked at me searchingly. "What do you think, Wenwright? Have you heard of any cases of epidemic craziness on the island?"

I shrugged. "I did my part when I called you," I said. "Now all I want is to go home."

But it wasn't quite true. There was something else I wanted, and that was to know if there was any chance at all that what I was beginning to suspect might be true.

The next day I was on the home-bound jet, taking a drink from the stew in the first-class section and still trying to convince myself that what I believed was possible. *The people were meaner then.* It wasn't just an offhand remark of Kavilan's; the hotel manager told me as I was checking out that it was true, yes, a few years ago he had a lot of trouble with help, but lately everybody seemed a lot friendlier. *Val Michaelis was a decent man.* I'd always believed that, in the face of the indecencies of his work at the labs . . . having left, would he go on performing indecencies?

Could it be that Michaelis had in fact found a different kind of virus? One that worked on different parts of the brain, for different purposes? That made people happier and more gentle, instead of suspicious, paranoid, and dangerous?

I was neither biologist nor brain anatomist to guess if that could be true. But I had the evidence of my eyes. *Something* had changed the isle from mean, litiginous, grasping—from the normal state of the rest of the world—to what I had seen around me. It had even worked on me. It was not just Edna Buckner's sweet self, sweet though she was, that had let me discharge eight years of guilt and horror in one night. And right here on this plane, the grinning tour groups in the back and even the older, more sedate first-class passengers around me testified that something had happened to them. . . .

Not all the first-class passengers.

Just across the aisle from me one couple was busy berating the stewardess. They didn't like their appetizer.

"Langouste salad, you call it?" snapped the man. "I call it *poison.* Didn't you ever hear of allergy? Jesus, we've been spending the whole week trying to keep them from pushing those damned lobsters on us everywhere we went. . . ."

Lobsters.

Lobsters were neither mammals nor insects. And the particular strains of Retroviridae that wouldn't reproduce in either, I remember, had done just fine in crustaceans.

Like lobsters.

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V

The NSA team caught up with me again six months later, in my office. I was just getting ready to leave, to pick Edna up for the drive down to Chesapeake Bay, where the company was considering the acquisition of an elderly and declining hotel. I told them I was in a hurry.

"This is official business," Mooney's partner growled, but Mooney shook his head.

"We won't keep you long, Wenright. Michaelis has been reported in the States. Have you heard anything of him?"

"Where in the States?"

"None of your business," he snapped, and then shrugged. "Maryland."

I said, "That would be pretty foolish of him, wouldn't it?" He didn't respond, just looked at me. "No," I said, "I haven't heard anything at all."

He obviously had not expected anything more. He gave me a routinely nasty look, the whatever-it-is-you're-up-to-you-won't-get-away-with-it kind, and stood up to go. His partner gave me the routinely unpleasant warning: "We'll be watching you," he said.

I laughed. "I'm sure you will. And don't you think Michaelis will figure that out, too?"

That night I told Edna about the interview, though I wasn't supposed to. I didn't care about that, having already told her so much that I wasn't supposed to about Michaelis's work and my suspicions. There were a lot of laws that said I should have kept my mouth shut, and I had broken all of them.

She nibbled at her salad, nodding. We were dining in the hotel's open-air restaurant; it was late spring, and nearly as warm as it had been back on the island. "I hope he gets away," she said.

"I hope more than that. I hope he lives and prospers with his work."

She giggled. "Johnny Happyseed," she said.

I shook my head slightly, because the maitre-d' was approaching and I didn't want him to hear. He was a plump young man with visions of a career at the Plaza, and he knew what I was there for. He was desperately anxious to make my report favorable. The hotel itself was fine. It was the top management that was incompetent, and if we bought it out there would be changes—as he knew. Whether he would be one of the changes I didn't yet know.

So when he asked, "Is everything satisfactory, Mr. Wenright?" he was asking about more than the meal. I hadn't been there long enough to have made up my mind—and certainly wouldn't have told him if I had. I only smiled, and he pressed on: "This is really a delightful old hotel, Mr. Wenright, with all sorts of marvelous historical associations. And it's been kept up very well, as you'll see. Of course, some improvements are always in order—but we get a first-class clientele, especially in the softshell crab season. Congressmen. Senators. Diplomats. Every year we get a series of seminars with Pentagon people—"

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Edna dropped her fork.

I didn't, but I was glad to have him distracted by the necessity of clapping his hands so that a busboy could rush up at once with a fresh one. Then I said, "Tell me, isn't it true that the crabbing has been very poor lately? Some sort of disease among the shellfish?"

"Yes, that's true, Mr. Wenright," he admitted, but added eagerly, "I'm sure they'll come back."

I said, "I absolutely guarantee it." He left chuckling, and wondering if he'd missed the point of the joke.

I looked at Edna. She looked at me. We both nodded.

But all either of us said, after quite a while, was Edna's, "I wonder what kind of seafood they eat in Moscow?" ●

NEXT ISSUE

You'll find quite an impressive line up in our December issue. Our cover story, "Promises to Keep" by Jack McDevitt, is a moving Christmas tale. Lucius Shepard returns with "Reaper," another novelette set in an exotic locale, and James P. Blaylock marks his first appearance in *IAsfm* with an intriguing short story, "Nets of Silver and Gold." Our other fine fiction is by Lisa Goldstein, Lisa Tuttle, James Patrick Kelly, and Wayne Wightman, and you won't want to miss our stimulating Viewpoint and Book Review by Charles Platt and Norman Spinrad, respectively.

This exciting issue goes on sale October 23, 1984.

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by Elissa Malcohn

art: George Thompson

The author of this powerful story has a masters degree in Applied Psychology, and works as an information specialist at the Harvard Business School. Although she is a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association, this is her first short story sale.

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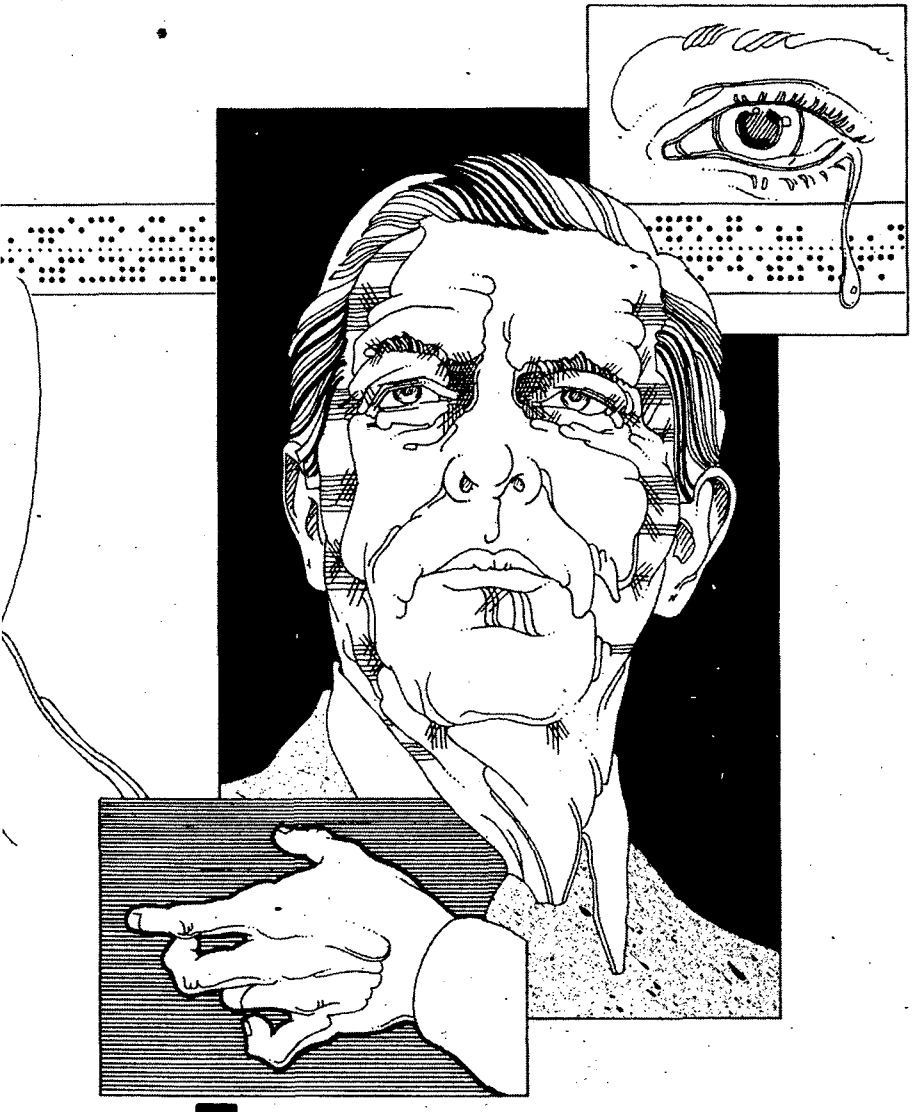

LAZULI

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Amy knows her name means "beloved." The knowledge is no comfort.

She sits on her bed, breathing hard. Her Lazuli doll, Amykins, is propped by her pillow and wedged into a corner where the walls of her bedroom meet. Her soft clothclone's face bears the real girl's features from the time Amy was three; now Amy is five. Amykins doesn't grow, but now her preprogrammed knowledge is making her cry tap water.

Dry-eyed, Amy realizes what time it is. She gets busy.

"You have to let me touch you," she tells the doll, lifting it from the covers. The doll cringes. "I don't want to hurt you, I promise you I won't hurt you, I have to hide you now."

How can a doll tremble? The computer in Amykins isn't *that* good; no, Amy is trembling, that's it. Amy's trembling. She can't cry any more but she can still tremble; Amykins can cry. Faithfully Amy fills her with water every day; the day Amykins can't cry is the day Amy will kill herself.

"It's all right, it's going to be all right. I won't let him find you, can't you turn yourself off if he finds you? You're a computer, you can do that." She begins to open drawers; no, her father would look in all the drawers. Her fingers fumble with the small knobs. Under the bed? No, he found Amykins under the bed before, he knows to look there.

There's no place left. No place left.

If Daddy can't find Amykins, he'll take Amy.

No, mustn't think of that. Mustn't.

As Amy opens her closet door the door to her bedroom swings open. Her father stands on the transom, in shirttails. With his rough, burly hand he covers the pink roses on her wallpaper where the light switch is. The overhead lamp blazes and Amykins' tiny chest pumps in and out. Or is it Amy's? No, Amy trembles. No, Amy breathes hard, too. She clutches Amykins hard to her and the chemically treated syntheskin discolors into bruises. She shouts, once: "*No!*"

"Give her to me." Gruff.

"No, please." Amy's voice is tired, defeated. "Please. Don't."

Amykins whimpers. "Don't," she echoes. "Don't. Mama . . ."

Amy closes her eyes.

"Give her to me," her father says, "or I'll take her myself."

The window is behind Amy. She could jump. She and Amykins could jump. They could turn themselves off together. They could.

Again, Amy can feel her arms leaving her, holding Amykins out to him. *Don't, arms. Don't. You don't want to do this.* Two years and no one's touched her. They've all touched Amykins.

Amy doesn't remember being three years old. Trembling, she hands over the doll.

Her father grabs it and swings it under his arm, like a football. He slams the door behind him. Shaking now, Amy snuggles under the covers and presses her pillow hard around her ears.

* * *

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There's a bottle of brandy in the bottom drawer of my desk. I refill my coffee cup.

Ben, my boss, sits in front of me and watches distastefully.

"Want a sip?" I ask.

"The day you come in drunk is the day I take that away from you," he says.

"A simple yes or no will do. *I* was showing some common courtesy. Look—" I show him my favorite file, the fat one, bursting with triplicate and quadruplicate copies logjammed on my desk. "This woman comes in, doesn't give her real name and gives me her ex-husband's address. Child abuse report; the kid's in his custody. I send my people there, he gives us his daughter without a hitch and we find nothing physically wrong. No recent burns, breaks or scars. The child's disturbed as all hell, that's plain, but physically she's healthy as a horse. I put the file away. The mother comes in again—yes, she *says* she's the mother, that much she admits to. And she comes again. Four times this month, once a week, like clockwork."

"So what are you asking me?"

"I don't want to keep putting this file away. I have a personal stake in this, you know."

"Yes, I know." Gently, he pries my fingers from my scalp, where I've begun to scratch my head again. Already my fingernails sport tiny scabs and a bit of blood.

Ben shakes his head and frowns at me. "Why do I keep telling you not to get drunk?"

I smile at him. "If you let me investigate this case I'll let you keep telling me not to get drunk. I'll even let you tell me over a couple of beers."

He hefts the file and shakes his head again. "All right." He lifts his hand to clap me on the shoulder and hesitates at the last moment. I can take a friendly clap on the shoulder, my nerves just go all dead, that's all. Ben understands this. He's like the older brother I never had.

He doesn't know what to do with his fingers. He jams his hands in his pockets. "Shit. I guess it's the thought that counts."

I giggle. "Yeah. Thanks, I appreciate it."

Mornings would go like this: when I was in elementary school my father would be the first of us to rise. He would go down to the kitchen and cook the first of two breakfasts: for my mother, and then for me. My mother would wake next, go down to the dinette and breakfast; then as in later years my father would not sit down but serve her deftly and efficiently, scooping up plates of food as soon as she had cleaned them and placing more food before her.

By the time I was seven, my hair had some length and my father took to braiding it while I ate breakfast. Painstakingly, as though in a trance, he would part my hair at the center, over and over and over, until he'd obtained a perfectly straight, needle-thin part that perfectly bisected my

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head. The same trance he would fall into as he chopped my soft boiled egg, looping the mixture of white and yolk with my fork until he reached a whipped froth. He would chop short, quick, fast, bent intently over the bowl with fierce determination. I dared not interrupt him.

When he plaited my hair into pigtails I had to keep still. How could I keep still as I ate his enormous preparation for me? He pulled steadily, rhythmically, executing perfect braids as long as I kept still or he'd have to do them over, jerking me into place.

Finally one day I didn't want to eat.

My father was behind me, braiding. "Why aren't you eating?"

"I don't feel like it," I said.

"What do you mean you don't feel like it? When I tell you to eat you'll eat!"

I began to cry. My stomach was in knots. "No!" I said resolutely. "I don't want this!"

Infuriated, he grabbed me by the chin. "How dare you disobey me!" he screamed, a high-pitched, boy's hysteria. "I'll teach you to disobey your father!"

He jerked my chin and neck up, then down to open my jaw, and held it. I began to tremble violently. With his other hand he grabbed a piece of toast, jammed it into my mouth and down my throat, his fingers between my lips. First the toast. Then the bacon. I squirmed in his arms, screaming, trying to spit out the food that he kept pushing back in, until I broke free and ran to the bathroom to vomit. And cry. And vomit.

I kept the bathroom door locked. He didn't call. I needed to steady myself, it was time, soon, to be leaving for school. I could not tell my mother, she was a romantic, glorifying in the time when I would get to know boys. She would tell me, "You chase them until they catch you."

When I felt ready, when my eyes were slightly red-rimmed and most of my tears dry, I stoically stepped out of the bathroom and walked past my glowering father, dragged on my coat and picked up my schoolbooks. He said not a word—no threats, no pleas, no apologies.

Nor did he apologize after he would start to hit me and could not stop, one slap per word, each word repeated over and over. Whenever a man on the television would yell I would crouch in my bed underneath the covers, sure it was him, sure I had done something I hadn't remembered doing but he'd *remember I did it. And through it all, his screaming at the heavens: "What did I do to deserve this?"*

Years later, I'd tell him, "You scare me. I hate you."

He'd glower at me again and grumble, "I don't care." My mother would tell me he loved me.

My hands are at my head again. I force them into my lap.

Ben is going to let me go after this case. I can hardly wait.

Amy's eyes are wide open as her father dumps Amykins at the foot of her bed. She stills her trembling; let him think she's asleep.

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Why doesn't Mother come home? I can't do this all by myself!

The door shuts quietly behind her. Now she hears a tiny cry. Amykins' circuitry knows that Amy is awake and allows the tears to come.

"Shh. Not so loud," Amy cautions. She doesn't like to quiet Amykins but her sense of caution is strong. "Here." She cradles the doll to her nightie and it sobs into her chest.

There is enough moonlight to see new scars on the syntheskin. For some reason, Amy doesn't dare take out a flashlight. Somehow she knows that if she does, Amykins will scream.

The doll feels sticky in her hands. Apologizing, wanting to bring her to a sink and fresh water, Amy collects the tears dropping from clothclone eyes and uses the hem of her nightie as a cleaning rag. She wrinkles her nose at the heavy smell of musk and wants to cry, if nothing else, to add her own tears to the cleansing process. Amykins pees a tablespoon of tap water onto the bunched cotton that Amy holds.

By morning all visible scars will be gone as the syntheskin chemically renews itself. The memory core, resting in a chip behind Amykins' eyes, will store everything.

"Mr. Purcell? My name is Peggy Sinclair. I'm from the agency."

"What else is new?" Jovial, a bit tired. Slightly harassed. No sign of hostility, or secrecy. We are talking on the phone; I wish I could see his face . . . or Amy's.

"Mr. Purcell, I'm the one who's been sending inspectors to your apartment."

"Oh," he says, amused. "So *you're* the one." His tone becomes serious. "Can you tell me what all these visits are going to do to Amy? I mean, she's just started kindergarten and none of her classmates—I mean, really, isn't this a bit *too* much attention for her own good?"

"Your wife made another report, Mr. Purcell—"

"Ex-wife, please. Honestly, what would you expect from a woman denied custody of her child? At least I'm not an outpatient, know what I mean?"

Ah, so that was why. "I know what you mean. When may I see you and Amy?"

"You haven't heard a word I've said."

"Tuesday all right? Four in the afternoon?"

I hear a sigh on the phone. "Oh, all right." A pause. "I can *tell* you're somebody's boss."

Hot damn, I can clearly see what his smile must look like. It's too gentle.

I drop the phone back in its cradle. Ben peels my fingers from my head and fills them with my coffee cup.

I take a sip. "Ugh. This is coffee."

"That's a coffee cup."

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"That's beside the point. Hey, what are you doing here? I'm not your only lackey."

"You're working. That gets you preferential treatment."

I stare at him. "You got problems with the help?"

"No," he says, thoughtfully. "Reports are down. You're the busiest one here."

I've got a hefty pile of folders including my fat one, but the load isn't all *that* much. "I like preferential treatment," I say blandly. "I'll keep working."

"Atta girl."

"Don't call me girl."

"Atta woman."

"Better."

Daddy must love me. Otherwise he wouldn't have bought Amykins for me. For him. I'm confused.

The doll sits inert on the bed. Amy has learned how to make hospital corners and her small fingers take care to smooth the sheets down. Not wanting to handle her pillow too roughly, she coaxes it into plumping.

Time to go to school.

"Morning darlin'," her father says as she bounds down the stairs. His speech is slurred on a piece of toast.

"Morning." Amy walks past him, holding herself perfectly straight, and goes to the refrigerator. She stares at the wallpaper as she makes a peanut butter sandwich, glancing occasionally at the distorted reflection her father makes in the toaster. She sucks peanut butter off her fingers and wipes them off on a towelette. She washes the butter knife in the sink and wipes her hands again. And again. She forces herself to let go of the towel.

Plastic bag. Lunchbox. Small can of juice.

"Goodbye," she says.

"Goodbye, now," he answers.

The walk to school feels good. Five blocks, straight down the avenue. There are tall hedges to her left; she plays a game of thug and vigilante. A thug is in the hedges, where she can't see him, but he won't jump out after her. If he does she'll flip him over her shoulder and watch his skull splatter on the sidewalk.

She likes the rough-hewn wood of the school doors, the bronze doorknobs embossed with the seal of the School Board. It all seems very medieval and towering, a light-and-dark green-walled city. She climbs the flight of stairs to kindergarten, turning around thick plates of glass-imprisoned chickenwire. The thug waits behind every turn; she can't see him through the milky glass. Her heart stills every time she rounds a partition . . . but he is gone. Run away. Waiting. Next time. She's sure.

Her teacher tells the class to say "No" to friendly strangers who sit in cars in the neighborhood. Amy shrugs. It doesn't concern her.

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Recess. "Amy, you're supposed to be taking a nap."

Amy closes her eyes, fakes it.

She sits by herself in a corner with wooden puzzles. The girls are touching each other's dresses and sharing tiny pots and pans. She doesn't watch the boys. She wants to play with building blocks but she'll have to get them away from the boys. The wooden pieces of the puzzle will do.

"Amy, you're supposed to work on one puzzle at a time."

She knows the correct response. "I'll clean it up."

"All right."

Later, one of the boys fluffs Amy's dress and she flattens herself against the window and shouts at him. The puzzles lie in a jumbled heap.

"Okay. Okay, shh. Enough, Amy."

Not enough. Not enough. Amy blinks. She says calmly, to the boy. "Stay away." He listens. Off to the side, two girls are arguing noisily over a plastic doll. Tearfully, they engage in a tug of war with it.

Forcing her hands to stay steady, Amy cleans up the puzzles, remembering which pieces belong to which puzzle. Gloating secretly, she congratulates herself.

Kindergarten, she decides, is not a place to make friends.

Damn, it's Tuesday.

Before I'm out of bed I'm into the routine I wanted to avoid. My nails are at my scalp and I am scratching furiously. My dandruff falls gently, like fresh snow glinting in a shaft of sunlight. My knees are dusted. When I see no more flakes my scalp will be clean, perfect. I shake my head back and forth, like one of those water-filled paperweights they sell around Christmastime. White crescents have nestled under my nails.

Carefully, I ease myself into stopping, and make my way to the shower. The hot water on my scalp is agonizing. I won't be able to shampoo for days.

"Show me how you love me." My ex-husband wraps my hair around his hand and jerks my head back to plant a kiss on my lips.

We are exiting from a fancy restaurant where he has paid for a handsome dinner. "You're a good cook," I kid him. "Thank you."

"I'll take it out in trade," he kids back.

Tired, I lean against the tiled wall and turn up the heat in my shower water. It splashes between my breasts and leaves an angry red splotch. The faucets are hidden in steam, now, but I am still shivering. It's times like this when the elaborately-handled cleaver in my kitchen seems my most precious possession. I let my tears mingle with the water. No one will know, that way.

I luxuriate in a powder-blue towel big enough to double as a bedspread. Purely business dress: mahogany colored skirt and blazer, matching vest. Pink tailored shirt to soften the austerity a bit. Small amber worry beads.

I have a sister-bottle of brandy on my dressing table. Now I take a few

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sips . . . to quiet my thoughts a bit, and to help dull the pain while I try to brush my hair.

Kindergarten, hmm? What's the closest public school to Amy?

And then: *Heaven help her soul if she's bearing her secrets through parochial school!*

By the time I walk into my office I am prepared. I am also exhausted. The paperwork feels good, it's mindless, I try not to think of what's behind the rubber-stamping and the red tape. It's only mindless when you don't think about it.

Ben is at my desk.

"Oh, get away!" I snarl.

That lovable idiot's filled my coffee cup with coffee again. Now he goes away. I want to tell him I'm sorry, but it'll have to wait.

Why it is I always end up apologizing to the people who treat me like dirt, instead of the people I treat like dirt? "That question goes on the back burner," I say aloud to myself.

A couple heads turn, turn back. They think I'm talking about a case. Never fear, folks, of *course* I'm talking about a case.

"Break a leg," Ben offers blandly as I pass his door.

"Today's Tuesday," I remind him. "Tuesdays I break kneecaps." And I'm out on the pavement, sweating onto the slip I carry that bears Purcell's address.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Purcell."

"Afternoon, Ms. Sinclair." His handshake is warm, and dry. I cast a glance about me, fishing for Amy. She stands by the kitchen sink, holding a towel. Hiding her hands.

He calls to her. "Amy! There's a lady here who wants to say hello to you."

Her eyes glaze over as she folds the towel and squares its corners. She lays it down flush with an edge of chrome and walks steadily to the door. "Hello," she says.

The three of us go to the kitchen table, where Amy sits next to her father and I am opposite them, on the other side. We begin by talking about the weather.

While Amy's father and I exchange cordialities, Amy sits quietly with her hands stiffly folded in her lap, beneath the lip of the table. She turns to her father as he speaks and toward me as I reply. When her neck grows tired from twisting she stares at the wallpaper (small delicate cornucopias. I thought they were pretty snails until I looked more closely). Amy's father doesn't take his sight off me. He hasn't glanced once at Amy and hasn't touched her; in fact, I can easily imagine a plate-glass wall separating them.

"I was just noticing how quickly the days pass," he's saying. "Before you know it Amy'll be off to college."

"Happens to all of us," I say, smiling. "Tell me, do you think I could talk to Amy alone? That is, if she doesn't mind?"

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His jaw hardens, ever so slightly. "If she doesn't mind? She's a *child.*"

"Amy." I gaze into her eyes as she turns her face toward me. "Could you and I go and talk, if your father says it's okay?" I watch her as she turns toward him for an answer. He frowns in silence and she turns back to me. Carefully, I say, "You can say no if you don't want to. And if we talk and there's something you don't like or if I bother you, you go and tell your dad."

She stares at me intently, and I can feel my eyebrows rise. Finally, she swivels back in her seat and looks up at her father. "I don't mind," she says sagely, "if you don't."

Oh, her timing is beautiful! I mentally dawdle with the thatched horns of the cornucopias. Avoid eye contact, don't pressure. Let there be no excuses for him to refuse us.

"No, I guess I don't mind. But you be careful; you're a big girl now. Yes, you may leave the table."

Amy slides off her chair, toward me. I follow her, with a courteous nod over my shoulder.

Amy doesn't understand what the women who visit her want. But this one has a soft voice and wide green eyes and a pretty mouth. And instead of asking, "Does your father hit you?" or, "Do you like it here?" she asks, "Isn't kindergarten dumb?"

Are children allowed to think kindergarten's dumb? Amy thought she was the only one who thought so. Secretly. Now she nods, feeling brave. "Will you tell my teacher?"

The lady makes a long face. "No. I won't tell anyone anything you don't want me to tell. *I* thought kindergarten was dumb." She smiles. "That makes two of us. Betcha there's more."

Could it be? "How many more?"

"I don't know," she says. "Lots."

They are sitting on Amy's bed. Amykins sits in her corner and doesn't make a sound. She is always quiet with strangers.

"They used to make us take silly naps," the lady says. "In the middle of the day! Only babies nap in the middle of the day. Now me . . . I used to sleep with my eyes open. All night! Everybody else had to close *theirs.*"

Amy draws herself up to her full height. "I sleep with my eyes open, too!"

"Really!" The lady frowns, a little. "I thought I was the only one. I could tell when a shadow was even *thinking* of moving."

Amy is smiling now. "Me too." Did grownups do this?

Grownups were grownups. They could do whatever they wanted to.

"Did you really go to kindergarten?"

"A long, long time ago. Wanna know how long ago?"

"Yes!"

"All right," she says low, with a sly smile. She whispers, "My teacher was a dinosaur."

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Praise the heavens, she can still laugh!

Her father—Ernest—is very quiet outside the bedroom, probably still in the kitchen reading a newspaper. Let him think I'm asking her questions out of a textbook. Let him think I glean nothing from what she tells me.

I shift a little on the soft, pliant mattress and the doll begins to tilt. Gently, Amy straightens it. Her fingers are deft and her touch is too light. Much too light.

"Have you had her for a long time?" I ask.

"A year." She purses her lips. "Maybe two. I don't remember."

If I had a doll like that *I'd* remember when I got her. But I'm groping now, I don't know much about dolls. They were dead plastic when I was a kid, I was always given dolls and I'd twist their heads off. I'd wanted a chemistry set.

"What's her name?"

She looks sad. "Amykins. Like my name but with a 'kins' after it."

She looks like you, too. I open my mouth to speak and a numbness grips my stomach, as though I am about to trespass, about to trample the grass on someone else's lawn. "I only had plastic dolls," I say, "and they didn't look as nice. If they were nicer I guess they'd be like friends. And they wouldn't be dumb, either, like kindergarten."

Amy's face is working. A smile creeps into her cheeks but it's a sad smile, sad and tender. Like a ceramic and bejeweled Madonna with tears in her eyes. She nods at me.

I glance about the room. Next to me, Amy takes a deep breath. I remark on a plastic bathtub boat on her dresser as she composes herself.

"When I was five," I said, "my bathtub boat was made from a wooden spool after it was out of thread. Of course, the spools aren't wooden any more, but they used to be." I gesture with my hands. Amy is looking at me, all eyes. "And there would be a rubber band, and a matchstick, and that would be the motor." My hands make circling motions. "I'd wind the matchstick on the rubber band until it was tight, then put the whole thing into the water and let it go and it would *race* to the other side!"

She is enthralled. "You made a boat? All by yourself?"

"No. No, I don't even remember how to put one together, but the spools are too light for that now, anyway," I say. "My father used to make them for me."

"Oh." Thoughtful. "Was he a nice man?"

"Sometimes." I notice, with an inner jolt, that my smile is as sad as Amy's. "Sometimes he was very nice."

"Mine, too." She frowns. "Sometimes."

She looks at me and her breathing quickens. I want to say, Tell me! Don't hold it back, it doesn't *have* to be a secret! I'm here to help you!

Patience. We must be as children, innocent and trusting. The last thing she needs to see now is another adult out of control.

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I say, "I'd like to be your friend. Talk to you again."

She says, "I have to ask my daddy."

"I know. That's all right."

As we return to the kitchen, Ernest looks up from his newspaper. He is sitting in the same seat as before. There is a soft smile on his face but his voice is guarded. "Well? Did you have a nice chat?"

Amy grins. "Ms. Sinclair told me about boats made from wooden spools."

His eyebrows shoot up. "*I* remember those," he says, smiling with some relief. He tells me, "I'd have thought that was before your time."

Amy stares at me. She probably doesn't think anything could be before my time.

"You flatter me. Perhaps Amy and I can talk again?"

Amy asks him, "Please?"

"Why, I'd think Ms. Sinclair has friends her own age," he tells her, looking at me. "Just as you should have friends *your* own age."

"I'm sure we both do," I reply. "But I'd still like to talk to Amy again. Just because I had dinosaurs for teachers doesn't mean she and I can't be friends. And I suppose," I add wistfully, "that the times I'm not here I'll just be sitting with a whole lot of papers to work on."

He gives me the slightest of nods. "I will consider it," he softly says. I can look into his eyes and see the fevered working of cogwheels. The girl, certainly, is not to be underestimated, but the man has a brilliance as well. I must not for a moment forget that.

As he helps me on with my coat he leans close to my ear and says, "If *you* had dinosaurs for teachers, need I ask what you think taught *me*?"

The sun is going down now.

Amy could slip out with Amykins, if they really tried hard enough. Once they snuck out of the apartment with Daddy's keys and spent half the night in the alley. Then they got scared because if he woke up he would come after them. The pavement was cold and hard and gritty, but above them the sky was clear with stars, all cozy in that thin strip between apartment buildings. It almost hurt to go back inside.

She could live in the trains. She heard some people did that. And you could go anywhere you wanted to, you could see the world.

Now it was getting dark again.

It wasn't the lady's fault that he would come in again. It wasn't! It wasn't any of the ladies' fault. He wanted to make it their fault. They'd visit Amy and then he'd keep coming in, and coming in. More often than ever before. As though they had whispered before, like he used to whisper to Mommy behind closed doors: if you visit then I'll visit, she'll think you're doing it too, you'll see.

Now Amykins is crying.

You're a computer, you're not supposed to have feelings! Why can't I cry like you do?

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Amy takes a deep shuddering breath and moves the metal lip that locks her bedroom window. She strains to push the window up. It moves a little. It moves a little more. It moves too slowly. Amy's arms hurt but she keeps pushing, pushing, she's opening the crypt, she's escaping from the haunted house like they have in the cartoons. She wishes Amykins was programmed to have strong arms.

Amykins is crying harder.

I can't hide you. I can't hide you anymore.

Amy crawls on the floor until she finds the spatula from her Little Miss Kitchen Set. She begins to hack at the dried paint jammed in the sliding tracks in the window.

"What's that noise?"

"Just playing!" *Believe me oh please believe me.*

The spatula looks as though someone took a bite out of it.

A breeze comes in through the crack and tickles Amy's neck. The alley looks so small from here, small like the Little Miss Kitchen Set. Is the plastic clock ticking? Amy thinks she hears it; she's never heard it tick before. She didn't think it could.

The window's stuck and it won't move any more. But Amy can fit through with Amykins. Quickly she returns to the bed and cuddles the doll to her and rushes back to the window. She hears a muffled cry against her chest. "Mama . . ." Her blouse is staining with tear water. Or pee water. Or both. The breeze is stronger now. Her legs are still warm indoors but her hair is outside, blowing in the wind.

There is a crash behind her, a door slamming into a wall very far away. Her legs are lifted high up and everything moves backwards. The bottom of the window hits her in the head, is she falling now? No, there's no more wind, everything's spinning but there's no more wind. No more wind. It's hot inside, where is the sidewalk, the little cracks in it? Where is the cool little corner, where is the train?

He is pressing her into the mattress, his arm is across her throat. There are spots playing in her head.

"Don't you *ever, ever* do that again!" he bellows. It sounds as if he bellows but his voice is very far away. Amykins is screaming. Where is Amykins? Amy's hand, her right hand, holds an ankle. The syntheskin on the ankle is going too soft, she's squeezing it too hard. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

The arm presses harder. Amy can't hear anything now, but her father's face is red and livid and his mouth keeps yelling something. It is very quiet.

Now her father is shaking Amykins. Her syntheskin is black and blue and yellow in some places; when did she let go? Amy can't feel her hands, only the arm on her neck. When did she let Amykins go? *I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY.* She can't hear anything because somebody is screaming inside her head. Everything has spots.

Did she hear the door shut?

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I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY i'm sorry i'm sorry i'm sorry i'm sorry imsorryimsorryimsorry sorry sorry sorry sorry . . .

There is a slight hiss coming out of the tape recorder. Then even that is gone.

Ben palms the microcassette that doubles as sound track from my first visit at the Purcells'. "You think of everything, don't you?"

"Hey, when you grow up with people calling you 'Liar' you learn to compensate." I can't help the smile that I try to choke down. "But it is sneaky, isn't it?"

"And you're proud of yourself, too."

"Damn right. Well?"

"I think I'll hold on to this."

You do that. My bank opens early; the original is in the vault. "Do you think we have a case here?"

"It has all the earmarks." He frowns. "We're just missing the physical evidence." He reaches out for my hair-entangled fingers again.

"Oh all *right*." I bat his hand away and force my own back to my desk. "This is going to be tough, this case. This is no slob I'm dealing with and I'm going to have to tiptoe until I can get enough evidence for a conviction. But I believe that evidence exists! And I want your blessing; will you back me?"

"With the present workload around this place we can take that time," he says. "I want you to draw up a schedule. Put down all your theories and how you plan to go about testing them. Do *everything*."

He looks worried.

"Ben, something's bothering you. Only the cops on TV get to do *everything*."

"Yeah." He lays a set of documents before me. "That's 'cause the cops on TV get funded by the networks, and we get funded by quota."

Something twists inside me as I read the figures. The branch axed and replaced by a peep show is ironic enough almost to be funny, if you're into sick jokes. "Christ. How widespread is this?"

"Growing. I sat twiddling my thumbs while you were out yesterday. I thought the phones had gone dead. The number of reports coming in here has plunged."

"I can see that. We're supposed to be happy about this you know. Remember those nights we were all getting soused, toasting to the day when we'd all lose our jobs in this business?" I hand him the papers back. "Why aren't we happy?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Maybe we're as bad as they are. Hey, put that brandy away—"

"I was taking it out for *you*." I shove the bottle back into its drawer. I swear the strongest glass made on this Earth is the type they make to hold booze. "To me it feels wrong. If the abuse is going to drop off it's got to drop off slowly, fade away. Sort of linear, you know, like zero population

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growth." I shrug. "Any self-proclaimed saviors on the market these days?"

"No."

"New legislation?"

"No. You know that."

"Just checking."

"The point is this." The shadows under his eyes face mine. "We need paperwork. And red tape. And reports. And they have to look as though we're really doing our jobs. You've got what looks like a real stinker and for our solvency it looks like a gem."

"You're disgusting me."

"That makes two of us. But it's the best of all possible worlds for this operation and, in the end, we hope, for Amy. I'm not asking you to milk it to inefficiency."

"I know." I pat his hand. My palm doesn't know quite what it's doing but that's all right, it's the thought that counts. I try to smile. "Does that mean I don't get my word processor this year?"

"Not even a talking watch." He pats my hand back. "Well, if we're going to go out we may as well go out obsolete."

"Now you can have the child you've always wanted."

Amykins sits in front of the television. Out of the speaker, a man's soothing voice-over tries to sell her kind. On the screen, high-density pixels configurate into family scenes; now a Lazuli doll pumps her little legs in a smooth arc as she rides a swing in someone's playground. Now a Lazuli doll vocalizes a "Please," and a "Thank you," at a family picnic. Now a Lazuli doll is hugged, and freely hugs back.

Amykins' syntheskin palm rests lightly on the screen, and the vibrations coming from it are warm and tingling. Once a man's hands held her softly; she opened her eyes and for the first time the configuration of a face peered into hers as she was turned on into life, and a soft voice said, "Good morning, little one."

All over the world, every Lazuli doll has that primeval memory logged deep inside. Every Lazuli doll, no matter what age when turned on, has that one welcome in common. Good morning. Good morning, little one.

Then, before she could form kinship attachments in the factory, Amykins was turned off and not reactivated until she arrived here. And when she awoke, she was in the arms of a little girl who cried hard tears of confusion, and didn't cry again.

Then Ernest's hands were on her babygirl's synthetic nipples, rubbing her hard enough to bruise, pinching her skin into black and blue marks. He thrust his fingers into her tiny synthetic pee hole and her automatic programming made her begin to wet his hand. Furious, he slapped her across the face and her chip registered: this is pain. Then a voice smoothly said, "Wow, you're just like her."

Now the voice-over on the television tells her, "What you have just

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seen is not just a commercial. These are real home movies, taken by real families . . . just like yours."

Amykins invokes a self-check function and waits while her programming and memories are verified. They are distant from her; she is half-aware as a built-in system tests and retests her parts. Her experiences flash by unencumbered by real time, much faster than her reflexes can react to them, and after each test is run she receives the same message. There is no error. There is no error.

"Good morning, little one." No error.

". . . taken by real families . . . just like yours . . ." No error.

Amykins says, "Off," and the screen darkens to a pinpoint of light. She runs her fingers briefly over its plastic wood casing, where Ernest's fist has pounded dents over the past two years.

A television cannot really remember.

Ernest is out buying groceries. Amy is in school. Amykins watches TV. Now she turns it on again and watches cartoons, where a young boy crosses his wrists against each other and turns into a Good Robot, so he can go out and destroy the Bad Robot.

Someone is fitting a key into the lock. Light footsteps, slow turn of the key. Amy. She walks in, dropping the key on its chain back into her blouse. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Where is he?"

"Market."

"Good." Amy turns toward the television and says, "Off." Then she turns to Amykins. "No one else in kindergarten has a Lazuli doll because their parents can't afford one. So I'm bringing you in for Show And Tell tomorrow. Daddy won't let me take you in the morning, so we're going to sleep in the school."

Unbidden, a tear forces its way out of Amykins' left eye.

"Shhh. It'll be all right, we just have to look like the people in the commercials, that's all." She lifts Amykins to her feet. "Just follow me. Quickly."

Hand in hand, they walk out the door and down the stairs to the lobby. They walk out the door, past the hedges. Amy squares her shoulders with vigilance, tries to look between the brambles. Amykins numbly curls her lips into an innocent smile and plays internal video games with the changing scenery as she and Amy walk, walk, walk. She looks up.

"Don't look at the sun," Amy warns her. "You'll go blind."

"No I won't."

"Oh." Amy looks down at her. "Sorry. I forgot."

Then she says, "Let's remember to tell that to the class."

"Okay." A command lodges in Amykins' head.

Amy fits her hand over the large brass doorknob that feels like a cold golden egg in her palm, and eases the door open. Grade-school classes are still in session; she places her fingers over her lips and they walk

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quietly down the hall, to the stairwell. They take the stairwell down to the basement, where there is a little-used Girls' Room. They go inside.

Amy tells her, "We'll have to hide from the custodian. But that's later."

My beeper goes crazy on my belt as I hop up the stairs to my office. Ben intercepts me as I round the partition.

"That was quick," he says.

"I cut my lunch short anyway," I say, throwing my sandwich in the trash. "What happened?"

"Purcell's daughter and the Lazuli are missing."

"The what?"

"The doll!"

"He reported *that*?"

"Well it's no ordinary doll. Why didn't you tell me it was a Lazuli?"

"Like I should know dolls! When did he call?"

"We got the report from the precinct shortly after noon; you don't think he'd be dumb enough to call *us*! Amy was supposed to be home from kindergarten. He just came back from grocery shopping with some 'buddies' he'd rounded up, and both of them were gone. Said the doll was never taken out of the house, too expensive to be broken, an investment sort of thing."

"An investment by a man who's unemployed?"

"Well it must have been an investment. Those dolls have memories, they *record* things! A Lazuli costs as much as my car!"

"Well I plumb don't know dolls . . . and anyway, Amykins just stared at me, I didn't even know if she was the real thing or not."

Ben is riffling through multicarbon forms. "We'll claim neglect for now . . . if we can establish that Ernest bought the doll himself rather than take proper care of Amy. If we can find her or—" He screws up his face at me. *"Amykins?"*

"Yeah, and the doll *looks* just like her, too. At about the age of three."

"Oh my God." He sinks into a chair. His face has turned pasty. "Get me Amy's file."

I get him Amy's file. He flips the forms until he comes across her psychological profile.

"Look at this." His finger traces the page. "Amy talks about being five years old, four years old . . . but not three, or two, or one. See? She says, 'I don't know,' or, 'I don't remember.' Even birthday parties; she remembers her last two birthday parties but none earlier. She remembers her mother from age four up to four-and-a-half but not earlier than four. And her mother kept reporting to us anyway. Even though Amy consistently showed no bruises, no damage we could see."

"But Amykins would have seen what happened."

"*Seen*?" At my puzzled look he says, "You really don't know dolls, do you? Ernest was raving about how the doll could break and that's why he didn't want her taken outside. These are *clothclones*, Peggy! They

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have syntheskin! They don't break, they *heal* themselves, just like the real thing!"

I blink at him, and in a tiny voice I say, "Morphine. They're like morphine." All of a sudden I begin to tremble, all over. We can't just find and keep Amykins for observation, we'll have to find and keep Amy, too. "Ben . . . our funding . . ."

But Ben is already on the phone, asking Records for a detailed breakdown of abuse reports and their frequencies. Then he places another call, to find out when Lazulis were introduced into the market. Then he calls our lawyer to subpoena records on sales and distribution from the manufacturer.

Carefully, Amy pries open the metal plate that hides electrical cables under benches built into the wall. She has to blink several times and catch her breath, and wait until her eyes have adapted to the dark. After a few minutes she sees the cross-hatched shadows thrown by streetlamps through chicken-wire windows and onto the floor.

Amykins' eyes have switched instantly over to night vision.

Carefully, they listen for footfalls. There are none.

Amy, who can't see the clock yet, whispers, "What time is it?"

Amykins says, "The little hand is just after the ten and the big hand is just after the four."

"Good. It's late, then."

Amy crawls out first. Then she motions for Amykins to follow her. Amy stretches until all the kinks from folding herself against the cables are out of her back, and then she replaces the plate against the bench. She pulls out a couple of half-crumpled chocolate chip cookies from her blouse and munches on them. They sit together on the floor. Amy yawns.

Daddy is looking for us. He'll send out people to find us and then we'll die.

She hugs Amykins close to her. *Where's Mama?*

A man's head shadows the floor, blocking out the chicken-wire.

"Quickly!" They roll prone on the floor and Amykins begins to cry. Amy has her pressed against the bench and is shaking hard against her. "He didn't see us. Shhh, quiet, he didn't see us. We're okay, it's going to be all right."

Suddenly Amykins' tears stop. She has run out of water.

"The fountain's on the other side of the room, I'll fill you from the fountain, we just have to wait until he's gone. Until he's gone. It's going to be okay, it will. It will!" Something wells up inside Amy, something washing over the numbness. She wants to throw up.

"She's in there. I think she saw me."

"Great," I say, disgusted. "She probably thinks you're her father."

"Wish I was." Ben grabs my hand and squeezes it, and a wave of

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revulsion sweeps through me. But this is Ben, I must remember that. I squeeze back.

He says, "Do you hear a motor?"

"Yeah," I whisper, "people are still driving at this time of night. Parking by the school is permitted after-hours." Even so, we squat in the bushes by the school. "License plate?"

"That's our man."

My hand worries its way into my pocket, and I open up the larger blade on my Swiss Army knife. Its red handle warms against my palm.

Ben knows what I'm doing. "This is Amy's father, not yours," he mouths at me. "Put it away."

All feeling has left me. I'm living on my adrenaline. "I can't."

"Yes you can," he says. "Please."

Ever so slowly, I fold the blade back in but keep my hand on the knife.

We flatten ourselves against the wall as Ernest makes the same rounds we had, inspecting one window after another. As he tries to jimmy his way through the entrance, we slide further around, camouflaged by the noise of his wrenching.

Ben whispers fiercely in my ear: "Now!"

Together we run to the opposite side of the school, carrying our shoes across the cement courtyard. Pebbles bite into my feet with a vengeance but we reach an adjoining basement on the other side of the boiler rooms in record time. Ben whips out a master key and unlocks the metal screen that hems in one of the larger windows. I boost him as his fingers clasp the window sill and he hoists himself onto the lip and pushes the screen up.

He breaks the glass with the butt of a pistol and quickly cuts through the chicken-wire with a pair of shears. Unlocking the window from the inside, he maneuvers his arm through the broken glass and lifts. I force my fingers through the new and tiny opening at the bottom and together we push until there is room for us to climb in.

We must take a stairwell up to the ground floor and round a U-shaped corridor until we reach a second stairwell that we take back down. As we approach the second stairwell we can hear Ernest take a battery-powered saw to one of the screens.

I run well ahead of Ben and slide down one of the bannisters. "Amy!" I cry out. "It's me, it's Peggy!"

"Peggg . . ." A weak voice, high and metallic, answers me.

"Amykins?"

"Peggg . . ." Weaker, now.

I dive to the floor as the sound of buzzing increases, and slide toward Amy and Amykins. Amy stares wide-eyed and doesn't move; I grab her wrist and pick up a faint pulse. When I slide my hand along her neck I find a tightly-wrapped electrical cable.

I turn now to Amykins, whose head has been half-cleaved from her body by the edge of a large metal plate dropped on her.

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"Did Amy do this?"

"Yes . . ."

"Amykins, you're going to have to trust me now. And you're going to have to trust Ben." Sitting up slightly, I motion him forward and swallow hard at the sight of grief spreading over his face. "They're alive, Ben, both of them. We've got to get out of here now!"

We free them. Above me I see the power-saw glint in the streetlamps, and the outline of Ernest's face. Momentarily it stares into mine with a look of pure hatred. For one wild second I am convinced I can pass my hands through the glass, through the wire, through the screen and take him by the neck and twist and twist and twist and twist. If I only tried hard enough. If I only, ever, tried hard enough.

Ben carries Amy. I carry Amykins, cradling her head against her body as it tries to heal. Up the stairs. Down the hall. To the principal's office.

We break our way in and barricade ourselves inside as Ben dials the precinct. Amy and Amykins are laid out on the tops of desks and I comb the supply cabinets for first aid. I cover Amy with a makeshift blanket made from a canvas backdrop that says, "Merry Christmas," and a secretary's sweater left in a closet.

Then we wait.

There are no smelling salts to be found anywhere. I open desk drawers and find a bottle of Scotch. I shake a few drops onto my finger and rub it lightly against Amy's tongue. I dribble a few drops to the back of her throat.

She comes out of shock coughing. I enfold her in my arms and in the canvas. "It's me, Peggy. You'll be safe with us."

"Mama!" She clings to me tightly.

"Not Mama . . . ," Amykins' voice says, distant. "Peggg . . ."

"It's okay," I say to the doll. "She's in shock. She'll be better in a few minutes."

"He's in," Ben says softly. "Quiet, everybody."

Ernest's footfalls echo down the corridor and reverberate off the walls. It is difficult to tell his exact position—which is real, and which is a reflection. We sit perfectly still in the darkness, until I hear Ben cock the hammer on his pistol. As the footsteps near us and their echoes lessen, Ben aims his gun at the locked door and fires a single shot.

Silence. Then we hear Ernest running back toward one of the stairwells. Outside there is a chorus of sirens. A disembodied voice connected to a bullhorn is telling Ernest Purcell to come out with his hands up. I sit by Amy with my hands folded tightly across my stomach. At least they're not in my hair. "Is his ex with them?"

"No. I don't see her."

Amy's breathing has steadied somewhat. I smooth the cold sweat off her forehead and brush her hair back with my fingers. Amykins lies still, sporting ugly discolorations around the rips in her syntheskin and circuitry. A tiny fist jerks up and down at one-second intervals.

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Minutes later, another voice comes over the bullhorn: "Benito Alvares? Are you there?"

Ben reaches for the principal's bullhorn and opens the window. "We're over here," he says. "Me, Peggy Sinclair, Amy Purcell, and Amykins."

"The father is on his way to the precinct now for holding. Do you have transportation?"

"None of us would be too good behind the wheel right now. And we need medics, including computer technicians; we have evidence that needs to be preserved. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative. There is an ambulance on its way."

"Repeat: we need computer technicians. A.S.A.P." He puts the bullhorn down, pushes himself from the window and pours some of the Scotch into a mug that says Teachers Do It With Class.

He passes it to me first.

I calmly shake my head. "My hands are perfectly comfortable knotted in my stomach, thank you."

He nods, and quickly raises the mug to his lips.

"What you are about to see," I tell a group of reporters, "is a portion of what the Lazuli doll, Amykins, has recorded in her memory chip. It is in true color, and if the angle of observation seems unusual, remember that it is from the viewpoint of a three-year-old girl equivalent.

"We have insisted that this press conference not be broadcast live, for reasons that will soon become apparent to you. We have taken the liberty of editing for this short presentation those portions of Amykins' subjective experience that are within the moderate range of abuse which she has undergone during the past two years. For those of you who would wish to have a more complete picture of her experiences, our records are available for your inspection."

Ben sits to the side of the podium. Statements having to do with Amy's condition at County General, Ernest's status at the precinct, investigations into the abuse of Lazuli dolls and their possible connection to the decline in child abuse reports, are in his hands. I do not envy him. He will be grilled.

I do not envy Amy, because I don't know what will become of her.

I do not envy Social Services, because I do not know what will become of us.

I do not envy the camera crews around me, who will want to turn off their eyes.

I do not envy the reporters, who will want to stare at their pads and who won't be able to.

I gaze into the blankness of the white movie screen behind me, while it is still clean and spotless.

Then I reach for the switch on the wall, and I turn out the lights. ●

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GAMING
by Dana Lombardy

(Continued from page 22)

make *Middle-earth Role Playing* a must for a game master's library.

If you're not familiar with Middle-earth as a fantasy realm, Tolkien's trilogy is set in a world before men came to dominate it. We had to share this planet with hobbits, elves, and dwarves, each race having one or more unique languages and cultures. What forced us to cooperate with such disimilar beings was the threat of evil domination by Sauron, the great wizard of Mordor. His magic, and armies of hideous orcs, worked constantly for the cause of Darkness.

Fortunately for us, we have some strong wizards and mages (magic users) on our side, too. In fact, five orcs are usually no match for one of our skillful warriors. But there are also trolls, dragons, giant spiders, balrogs, hummerhorns (giant insects), werewolves, and the Nazgul (Ringwraiths—undead servants of Sauron) to contend with. Middle-earth is a hostile and exciting world to adventure in.

MERP game rules are well-presented. The first section is written specifically for the novice. It explains what a role-playing game is, and provides a sample adventure to help beginners understand the basic concept of role-playing. The rest of the first part consists of some definitions and an outline on how to learn how to play *MERP*.

The remaining 98 pages of the book present rules, charts, tables, and information about Tolkien's Middle-earth. *MERP* is a simplified version of Iron Crown's *Rolemaster* frp system. If you're familiar with the books in that series (*Arms Law, Claw Law, Spell Law,* and *Character Law*), you can immediately incorporate the *MERP* rules with them to get higher levels of realism and complexity for adventures in Middle-earth.

The character you choose to play, whether a human, hobbit, elf, or other race, has six attributes or "stats" to keep track of during the game. These are: strength (ability to use your muscles to best advantage, not just brute strength); agility (manual dexterity); constitution (general health and well-being); intelligence (reasoning and common sense); intuition (wisdom, luck, etc.); and presence (charisma).

As with other role-playing games, a referee guides you and other characters through an adventure. When a decision is required, your character must choose what to do—alone, or with the rest of the adventure party. Depending on the quest of your adventure, the dangers involved, and the experience and treasure to be found, your primary goal is to survive and go on to the next adventure.

If you're an experienced gamer, don't just assume that Iron Crown's *Middle-earth Role Playing* game is just another fantasy role-playing game. No matter what frp system you're currently into, there's great value in the information presented on Tolkien's world. More important, *MERP* offers beginners a great way to become involved in role-playing as a hobby. We need to continually attract new gamers if we want to have enough players around to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *D&D®* in 1994. ●

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(from page 44)

SOLUTIONS TO SCIENCE FANTASY PUZZLE QUIZ

1. The earth, for one. Just toss the rock straight up.

2. The astronaut walked until he was certain he had gone farther than a kilometer. At some point along his path he has traveled *exactly* one kilometer.

3. As Victor Serebriakoff points out, in his *Mensa Puzzle Book* (1982), this ancient riddle does not specify that the eggs are chicken eggs. Because there were reptile eggs on earth long before there were chickens, eggs obviously came first.

4. Jorkens won the bet by reminding his friend that half a year ago the earth was on the opposite side of the sun.

5. It is often claimed that the Great Wall of China is (as the *New York Times* put it on its editorial page of March 8, 1983) "the only mortal creation visible from the moon." It ain't so. No human-made structure on the earth is visible from the moon. Even the outlines of continents are hard to see.

6. If the retinas of an invisible man's eyes were invisible, as they are in Wells's story, there would be no way they could register light. A completely invisible man would be totally blind.

7. From Newton's law of gravity it follows that zero gravity would prevail everywhere inside a hollow sphere regardless of how large the sphere or how massive its shell.

8. This would indeed work, and even supply a small amount of power. But it is no more a perpetual motion machine than devices that extract power from ocean tides. The gyroscope would be stealing power from the earth's rotation, inevitably slowing the earth's spin by a minuscule amount.

9. Rotate the page 90 degrees counter clockwise to see the name of the magazine.

10. Hold the page horizontally near the tip of your nose, close one eye, and read the message on a steep slant. (Thanks to Marvin Miller for this novel presentation of an old illusion.)

For a follow up on last May's puzzle, please turn to page 169.

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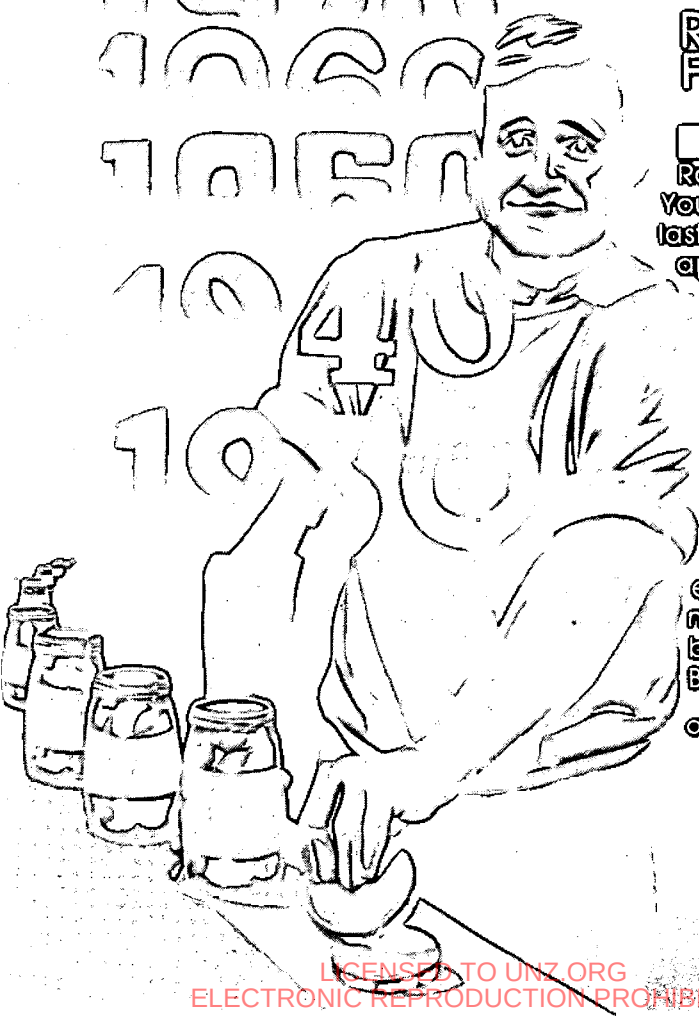
FINDOKIN'S WAY

by Robert F. Young



Robert F. Young last appeared in our March issue with "The Princess of Akkir." His latest book, *The Wezir's Second Daughter*, will be published early next year by DAW Books.

art: John Jinks

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"We'll be back to get you, Findokin, exactly one Earth year from now," said the warpship captain just before the ship-to-planet transmitter beamed me down to the North American continent.

That was fifty-two years ago.

The World Council of Kaffar wanted to find out how the American poor were coping with the 1930s depression, so they sent me here to study them. Then, apparently, they forgot all about me. Either that, or they lost my genetic pattern and as a result have never been able to find me.

Well, I studied the poor. For a while, anyway. Not just because I'd been told to, but because I didn't have much of anything else to do. I'd been taught how to speak everyday English and had been inculcated with American customs and mores. Since most Kaffarians and most Americans look pretty much alike, there's never been a problem on that score. The same kind of organic particles that fell on Kaffar aeons and aeons ago fell on this planet too.

In the little town where I first took up residence I used to stand on one of the street corners with some of the guys who were unemployed and listen to them talk. The town was in Concord grape country and some of the guys worked part-time in a grape-processing plant. I got a part-time job there myself. There was also a canning factory and a furniture factory. The canning factory hummed during summer and fall, but the furniture factory had closed its doors some time ago, because most people couldn't afford to buy furniture any more.

On the street corner the guys would keep talking about when times would be good again and how then they'd be able to get good jobs. They would even stand there in the wintertime. In the summertime, though, we would sometimes sit in the village park. But the subject seldom changed.

One of the guys was named Jake Evans, and he and I got to be pretty good buddies. He was in his early thirties, but he looked older. Sometimes he made me think of a gaunt and leafless tree the wind had been trying its damnedest to blow down without ever quite succeeding.

Jake's favorite pastime was hooting at politicians and other public dignitaries. He would often bum into Buffalo when a public figure gave a speech there and hoot and holler and ask embarrassing questions. I used to go with him sometimes, and after a while I began to hoot and holler and ask questions too. By that time I'd pretty much given up hope of ever being picked up and had resigned myself to the fact that the things that went on in America had as much to do with my welfare as they did with everybody else's.

After Roosevelt got in, things began to look better. The grape-processing plant raised its basic rate from twenty-five to thirty cents an hour. Some of the guys joined the CCC, reducing the group that gathered daily on the street corner to a skeleton crew. Eventually I managed to get a

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"full-time" job at the plant (my expense money was almost gone) and began working there four months a year instead of only one. It was now possible to draw unemployment insurance when you were laid off, and this worked out fine for me, although the insurance didn't begin to cover all the weeks I wasn't working. But this was no problem, because I always saved enough out of my wages to see me through.

Every so often word would get around that Ford was hiring. The company had built an assembly plant on the outskirts of Buffalo and the men working there made five dollars a day. Whenever word got around, we'd hightail it down there and wait at the gate. There would be a big crowd there, and all of us would stand and wait, even when it was biting cold. Sometimes a foreman would come out and grab one of the biggest guys and pull him inside. After a while it dawned on me that someday I might get grabbed, because I'm six feet tall. That was when I began to have second thoughts, and whenever a foreman would come out, I'd fade back into the crowd. Not long afterward I stopped going down there altogether. If they paid five dollars a day, it stood to reason they'd get five dollars worth of work out of you, and I didn't want a steady job that bad.

In fact, I didn't want a steady job at all.

That's one of the things being unemployed most of the time does to some people. It turns them into bums.

I was drafted early in 1942 and after a long spell in the states I was shipped to the South Pacific. But I was in the Quartermaster Corps and never saw a Jap till after the war when I wound up in Japan as part of the occupation force. I made sergeant before I was discharged, but I was still a bum.

Now, here in the eighties, we have a new depression. But it hasn't affected my way of life. Since the war, the only places I've ever worked have been canning factories, and even in hard times canning factories are always busy part of the year. When I'm not working, I hole up and draw unemployment insurance. But I have to keep moving around because Kaffarians have a much longer life span than Earth people, and I don't age. So what I do is stay in one place for about ten years; then, after I receive my last unemployment insurance check, I pack my suitcase and take off for a different part of the country, change my name, obtain a new social security number and get a job in another canning factory. Right now my name is Clark Cooper. I coined it by combining the first and last names of my favorite movie stars.

Although I've confined my career to working in canning factories, I've always had the urge, ever since the 30s, to become a fruit tramp. That's what migrant workers used to be called. But I've always held back because it might be difficult to draw unemployment insurance. Someday, though, I may say goodbye to canning factories and take to the road.

* * *

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The new depression has given me sort of a comfortable feeling. The town I'm living in now isn't far from the one near which I was beamed down and where I began my working career. But you don't see any of the unemployed standing on street corners and the only people you see in the park are old men who've retired. But I don't associate with them, even though I belong to their age group; instead, I associate with young people.

Compared to the 1930s depression, this one is a breeze, but on some people it's been pretty rough. It's been particularly rough on young people who want to get a job, but in lots of cases they don't really need to work because their parents are relatively rich.

This is the case with the girl I'm at present keeping company with. In college she majored in chemistry, but as yet she hasn't been able to find employment. But she has a new Chevette which her father gave her for Christmas, all the spending money she needs, and more clothes in her wardrobe than she knows what to do with. I keep pointing these things out to her when she starts griping about not being able to find a job, but she always says, "Yes, but it's not the same. I want to be on my own." Then she lights into me. Why don't I try to better myself? she asks. Why don't I try to work my way through college? It's a shame for someone as intelligent as I am, she says, to work half a year in a canning factory and then loaf the other half. Then she upbraids me for rolling my own cigarettes. If I can't afford to smoke civilized cigarettes, she says, I should at least have enough dignity to quit.

I have, of course, during my fifty-two years on Earth, kept company with many girls. I much prefer the pre-World War II girls. They had an outward naïveté which I found reassuring. But this eighties girl, whose name is Jennifer, fascinates me nevertheless. Maybe a paradox is at work and she appeals to me because of her *lack* of outward naïveté. Or maybe, out of perversity, I like her because she's spoiled and self-centered. But I think the real answer lies in the fact that she's strikingly attractive in a dark-haired arrogant way, and so stunningly built she makes the girls I remember from my youth on Kaffar seem like beanpoles.

On Sundays Jennifer and I go for long drives in her Chevette and take in the sights and eat out. Sometimes we go swimming Sunday afternoons: The lake is only about a mile from town. She is deeply tanned from lying in the sun every weekday afternoon, and she makes me look like a corpse. But corpse or not, I still look good in a pair of swimming trunks. I'm built like a decathlon champion, I haven't an ounce of fat on me, and I don't look a day over 28.

Turned around, the figures show my true terrestrial age: 82.

Some Sundays we have dinner at her house. Her parents put up with me, but it's clear they don't like the idea of her going with a common canning-factory worker. Her father is an automobile dealer. Chevrolets. He has managed to stay afloat during the depression by charging people

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twenty-five dollars an hour for repair work, and he's smart enough to keep good mechanics on his payroll so the people'll come back.

One Sunday late in July when I am having dinner there, he offers me a job. He is a big, square-shouldered man who used to play fullback on his college football team. Jennifer inherited his sharp features, only in her case they don't look sharp. At least not yet. "How would you like to sell cars?" he asks over his slice of lemon pie.

"Nobody's buying cars," I tell him.

"Nobody *was* buying cars. But the economy has picked up, as you'd know if you ever read the papers, and people are beginning to buy them like mad. So I need another salesman."

I give the matter some thought. I know that Jennifer is looking at me and I suspect that her finger is in the pie.

"You'd have to get a new suit of course," her father says, "and make a few other minor changes."

"What's the matter with the suit I'm wearing?" It's a gray pinstripe which I got from the Salvation Army just two weeks ago.

"It's too conservative. What you need, though, isn't necessarily a new suit, but a flashy blazer and maybe a pair of maroon slacks. You've got to be modern. People expect car salesmen to be. And your hair. You'd have to let it grow longer and get it styled."

I lay down my fork. "I won't do that."

Jennifer tugs on my arm. She's been after me about my hair for months. I can't see why. I part it neatly on the side and get it cut every three weeks. "My hair stays the way it is."

"Damn it, Jen, I can't take on a salesman who looks as though he just stepped out of a 1930s movie!"

"Well what difference does it make how he looks if he can sell cars?"

"Maybe he *can't* sell cars."

"Well at least let him try!"

Her father looks at me with resignation in his eyes. "What do you say, Clark?"

I can see he hopes I'll say no. And no is what I want to say. I know that if I quit the canning factory, I probably won't be able to get my job back. Worse yet, I haven't got enough time in this year to draw unemployment insurance, and if I should quit, I wouldn't be able to draw it anyway. But the really bad point is that if I take the job I'll have to work *twelve months a year*!

The moment is a critical one. If I say no, I may lose Jennifer; if I say yes, I'll be saying goodbye to a way of life that fits me like an old shoe. The presence of Jennifer beside me is the deciding factor. I just can't bring myself to let her down. "All right. I'll give it a whirl."

The next morning I tell my boss at the canning factory that I've found another job and that afternoon Jennifer helps me pick out a blazer and slacks. They set me back a bundle and make me look like a Christmas tree. Then she says, "Now we'll get you some new shoes."

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"Shoes? I don't need shoes. I just got the ones I have on a month ago."

"They look like you've been hoeing corn in them."

The new shoes set me back $49.95. If I'd bought the ones she wanted me to, I'd have been set back over seventy bucks.

"Well," she says the next morning when she picks me up at my rooming house to drive me to work, "you'll never make the ads in *Playboy*, but you do look pretty sharp at that."

When I see the list prices of the cars in her father's showroom and remember that there's a seven percent sales tax, I'm sure he must have been kidding when he said people are buying them like mad. Then he explains that most people don't lay down that much money, that usually they don't lay down any money at all but use their old car as a down payment and pay off the balance in monthly instalments over a period of four years. The magic word is GMAC.

He gives me a little book which shows the list prices of used cars, tells Jonesy, his other salesman, to break me in, and retires to his office. Jonesy, a pleasant young man who looks even more like a Christmas tree than I do, tells me all he thinks I should know, not only about selling cars but about selling people the need to buy them, and after he gets through talking, I stand there primed, waiting for my first customer. Except for the hour I take for lunch, I stand there all day without a single potential car-buyer showing his face.

But the next day is different, and to my amazement I sell a Caprice.

I don't even have to pressure the customer. He just walks in and tells me he wants to buy the brown four-door that's parked in the showroom.

Afterward, when I figure out my commission, I find that I've earned as much in one day as I would have earned in a whole week at the canning factory!

That night, when Jennifer and I go out to dinner, she is effervescent with plans for our future. First of all, she says, I must buy a car of my own, and then we will go looking for a nice lot on which to build our new house. The weird part of it is, I go along with the whole deal, even though I am 82 and she is only 23!

But the age difference doesn't really count, because I only look a little older than she does, and she won't age any faster than I will. Kaffarians are long-lived, but they don't live forever, and I am well past the midpoint of my life.

We shall grow old together, Jennifer and I.

She begins teaching me how to drive, and not long afterward I buy a Caprice. It's a demonstrator and Jennifer's father gives me a good price on it and waives the down payment. Meanwhile I sell two more cars—a Celebrity and a Monte Carlo. I stop going to the barber and switch from Bull Durham to tailor-made cigarettes.

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Back in the hills we find a beautiful piece of property which affords a superb view of the lake. Jennifer talks her father into buying it for us, and a contractor, who is a good friend of his, tells us he will tear down the old farmhouse and the ramshackle barn which stand there now and build us a beautiful three-bedroom Cape Cod for $109,500. I am appalled, and when I find out how much it will cost to pipe in gas, install a septic tank and dig a new well, I try to back out. Then Jennifer tells me that her dowry will more than cover the down payment and assures me that with both of us working, paying off the twenty-year mortgage will be a breeze. I tell the contractor to go ahead.

On a Sunday late in August her grandparents on her mother's side drive out from Rochester to meet me. Jennifer has told me all about them. Her grandfather is a retired Kodak worker and he and her grandmother spend every fall, winter, and spring in Florida playing golf and eating out at expensive restaurants, and during the summer they do the same thing up here.

He gives a little start when we are introduced and it's all I can do to keep from giving one too, because I know him. In the full-fed but sagging face I discern the shining countenance of one of my old World War II buddies. Barney Waite. We used to get drunk together in the Philippines on Paniqui whiskey. One time Barney got so drunk he blanked out for two days and couldn't remember a thing that had happened. He almost went blind. And here he stands before me, looking like his own grandfather!

"Do you know," he says, after we shake hands, "for a minute I thought I knew you. Used to be a guy looked just like you in a Quartermaster outfit in the Philippines during the war."

"It could hardly have been me," I tell him, "seeing that I'm only twenty-eight years old."

"Oh, I know it couldn't've been you. Not just because you're young, but because you're a car salesman. This guy I knew—you know what he wanted to be? He wanted to be a fruit tramp. Come on, let's go out in the kitchen and have a beer."

Since meeting him I've had sort of a funny feeling about Jennifer and me. It would have been bad enough if I'd been buddies with her father, to say nothing of her grandfather. What would she think if she knew that Barney and I used to get drunk together during World War II?

I go to get my hair styled. "It's not quite long enough," the beautician says, "but I'll fix it up as nice as I can. After it grows a few more inches, I'll have you looking like that handsome newscaster on Channel 3."

The first week in October the village holds a Festival of Grapes to celebrate the grape harvest. This is a yearly event and has become as important as a county fair.

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On Friday night there is a grape-stomping contest in the park and Jennifer and I go to watch it. So does just about everybody else in town.

It's a warm night for October. A platform has been built in the park and upon it are three halved wine barrels half-full of grapes. The contestants are local celebrities who have been divided into groups of three. The object of the contest is to see which member of each group can stomp out the most juice in five minutes.

The first three contestants are the mayor, the contractor who's building our Cape Cod, and one of the local lawyers. They climb up on the platform and stand behind the halved barrels. They've rolled up their pantlegs and are wearing old shoes, except for the mayor, who's wearing a pair of cowboy boots. He is short but big-boned, and weighs at least two hundred pounds. The contractor is tall and lanky and is wearing a cowboy hat, and the lawyer has hairy legs and looks like a member of the Mafia who came to town to make book.

Wheeeeeeep! goes the whistle, and into the barrels they jump and begin to stomp.

Uproarious laughter from the crowd.

Cameras are recording the event for posterity. One of them belongs to a photographer from the local newspaper. MAYOR, CONTRACTOR, LAWYER FROLIC IN GRAPES AT FESTIVAL. Grape juice flies up from the barrels, spattering the contestants' legs, and the mayor's boots go *splosh! splosh! splosh!*

Association whisks me back through time, and I find myself working in the grape-processing plant again. I am filling press blankets with a juicy mixture of pulp and skins and stems, folding the blankets one on top of the other till they will be piled high enough to be put under one of the presses. The mixture comes down from one of the kettles on the floor above and when it gushes out of the hose it spatters me and my helper, turning our faces and arms purple. My helper has three kids, and brings tomato sandwiches in his lunch because he can't afford to buy cold cuts. We are making thirty cents an hour.

I return to the present and look at the three clowns up on the platform. The mayor only gets four thousand a year, but this is cigarette money, for he is a plumber and charges eighteen dollars just to look at your toilet. The contractor is up in the six-figure bracket, and the lawyer charges fifty dollars just for a consultation.

Something goes *click!* in my mind, and I holler, "If you guys keep stomping so hard, your feet'll swell up and won't fit into your Florsheims!"

Laughter from the crowd. "Shhhh!" Jennifer says.

"Hey, you with the hairy legs!" I shout. "If you stomped grapes like that in Italy, they'd deport you!"

"Clark!" Jennifer says.

I get off a good one. "Lookit the mayor! He's stomping out the vintage where the grapes of graft are stored!"

A well of silence has begun to grow around me and a cop is working

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his way toward me through the crowd. "Clark, if you don't stop it, I'll never speak to you again!" Jennifer says.

I am wound up now. "If anybody wants to build a house, stay away from that guy in the cowboy hat. He'll fleece you for all you've got!"

The cop has reached my side. He grabs my arm and starts marching me out of the crowd. Jennifer follows. I'm tempted to level the cop, but decide I hadn't better.

At the edge of the crowd Jennifer's father materializes from somewhere. He talks the cop into letting me go, then he faces me. He is furious. "Those three people are good friends of mine," he says. "If you don't apologize to them for what you said, you're fired!" He turns and walks away.

When I drive Jennifer home, she doesn't say a single solitary word.

On Saturdays the showroom is open only half a day. I put my time in the next morning, but no one comes in to look at the new cars. Jennifer's father asks me if I returned to the park last night and apologized to the "three fine, outstanding citizens" I insulted. I shake my head. "I'll give you till Monday night," he says. "If you haven't apologized to them by then, don't bother to come to work Tuesday morning."

I don't go near Jennifer over the weekend and she doesn't come near my rooming house. I spend much of the time in deep thought. I know I've got a good deal. It's the best deal I've ever had since I arrived on Earth and I know I'll never get a better one. What harm will it do if I apologize to the three men I insulted? I won't be any the poorer for it, and my future will be secure.

Then I get to thinking about Jake Evans. *He* wouldn't have apologized. He never apologized to anyone. One time when he harassed a state senator, the senator said he wouldn't prefer charges if Jake would say he was sorry. Jake laughed in his face.

But Jake never needed to apologize to anyone because he never had anything to lose. For a long time it was that way with me too. But not any more. I've got the whole world on a string, and the Findokin who didn't care whether school kept or not is now a respectable middle-class citizen.

On Monday morning when these two guys come sauntering into the showroom, I know at once that they're from Kaffar. Sure, they're wearing corduroy slacks and plaid shirts and their hair is styled, and they *look* like Americans. But a Kaffarian can spot another Kaffarian a mile away.

I walk over to where they're looking at a brand new Impala. I pat the hood. "Beautiful job, isn't it," I say.

Both of them look at me then. They'd been pretending they hadn't seen me. The taller one has a long nose and the shorter one has a squarish face. The former has a genetic detector, disguised as a pen, in his shirt pocket. "We've come to take you home, Findokin," he says. "I'm Smidden. My partner here is Oggsvoten."

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He handles everyday English even better than I could when I first arrived, although there's no need for him to speak it, since Jonesy's in the used-car lot and Jennifer's father hasn't shown up yet.

"Well it was nice of you to come for me," I say, "but you're fifty-one years late."

"That's not our fault," Oggsvoten says. "The ship that was supposed to come back for you got sent out on another mission and in the meantime somebody misfiled your dossier and the Council forgot all about you."

"Fortunately," Smidden says, "one of the file clerks found it when he was looking for somebody else's."

"I must have quite a bit of back pay coming."

"You'll have to take that up with the Council."

"Well it's not the back pay that concerns me so much. It's the fact that if I go back with you, I'll be way behind the times. It'll take me the rest of my life to catch up."

"You should be thankful you weren't forgotten about altogether," Oggsvoten says.

"Suppose I don't want to go back?"

Smidden says, "You know you got to whether you want to or not."

"Why should you want to stay here anyway?" Oggsvoten asks. "This is a shit planet."

"Maybe I like it here."

"Well maybe you do and maybe you don't, it don't make no difference," Smidden says. "So let's go. We were beamed down two miles outside of town. The ship's in geosynchronous orbit and the focus of the transmitter can't be changed, so grab one of those cars out there."

I lead the way to my Caprice. The two Kaffarians climb into the back seat and I get behind the wheel. They tell me which way to go. Once we're outside of town, they direct me to the hill that the transmitter is focused on. I park the Caprice at the side of the highway and accompany them up the slope. Smidden pulls a tiny transceiver out of his pants pocket, contacts the ship and says we're ready to come on board.

While we're waiting for the beam I light a cigarette. Casually I point to the genetic detector in Smidden's shirt pocket. "You must have a bigger, more powerful one on the ship. You could never have located me from space with one that small."

Smidden pats the detector. "You sure *are* behind the times, Findokin. The way they make these things now, you don't need a big one, and this little baby's the only one we've got. We picked up your pattern with it the minute we emerged from the warp."

The transmitter beams us up to the ship. Warships used to be big, but this one isn't. The transmission room and the control room are one. "Let's go," Smidden says to the pilot in Kaffarian, and the pilot, who was manning the transmitter, seats himself in the cockpit.

Smidden turns to me. "Come on, Findokin, we'll take you to your cabin."

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He leads the way aft. Oggsvoten follows close behind me. My cigarette has gone out. I drop it to the deck. Apparently the pilot is the only other member of the crew.

The warp gyro begins to hum beneath the deck. In a few minutes the gyrations will reach mass-transfer velocity.

My cabin turns out to be the brig. Smidden swings the lock-door open. Quickly I turn and level Oggsvoten with a short right which Jake Evans taught me how to throw; then I spin around, grab the detector out of Smidden's pocket and shove him into the brig. I slam the door shut and secure it.

I drop the detector to the deck and stamp on it.

A ship-to-planet transmitter has to be operated by someone outside the field-zone, so I can't beam myself back to Earth. But all warpships carry at least one life raft in the event of an emergency. Or at least they used to. I step over Oggsvoten's prostrate body and start searching for the boat bay.

The hum of the gyro turns into a high-pitched whine. I have about one minute left.

The bay should be on the starboard side. There are only three lock-doors. I begin opening them. I am lucky: I find the bay on the second try. There is only one raft. I slam the lock-door shut, secure it, climb on board the raft and close the nacelle. The hull lock-door opens as I nose the craft toward it; and a moment later I am in space.

A second later the warpship winks out of sight.

I land the raft in a gully. I don't believe anyone saw it come down. I am nowhere near the town where I live, but I know which way to go to reach it. I find a highway and begin hitchhiking in the opposite direction.

Evening finds me deep in apple country. I have enough money on me to buy my supper and a night's lodging in a motel. I am wide awake by dawn. I slip into my slacks and shirt and shoes, leave my blazer hanging in the closet, and step outside. I can smell the wine-sweet smell of apples. I strike off across the fields and presently I come to an orchard where men are already at work. I find the foreman. "Sure you can work—why not?" He gives me a ladder and a basket and I climb up among the branches of one of the trees. The leaves are still wet with morning dew. Drops of dew fall upon my face as I climb higher into the branches. It is as though a dryad is kissing me on the cheek. The last of dawn's pinkness fades from the sky and the sky becomes a benign blue. I eat the first apple I pick for breakfast. It is a McIntosh. Its wine-sweetness fills my mouth and courses through my body, and I feel one with the Earth. I breathe deeply of the fresh morning air. I know they will never go to the expense of sending another ship for me. When cold weather comes I'll go south and pick oranges. The first thing I'll do when I get my first pay is go to a barber and get a real haircut. ●

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END CRUISE

by Rand B. Lee

The author is 33 and lives in Key West, where he reads Tarot professionally. His last appearance in *IAsfm* was with "Tales from the Net: A Family Matter" in the May 1983 issue. His work has also appeared in *Amazing*.

art: Robert Walters

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Doctor Leo Vahanian hated emergency room work at the best of times, but he hated doing it long distance most of all. He had flown to Key West for the weekend, with strict orders to his staff that they not disturb him for any emergency short of nuclear war; halfway through a Saturday night of lust and coconut liquor, his subcutaneous beeper had gone off, and that had been the end of the lust, at least. Slamming the bedroom door on his partner, he hurled himself across the hotel room to the wall Net console, and snarled his hospital access code into its electronic ears. Moments later, mist swirled in the Net screen, and resolved into the frightened face of his chief aide, Drupesti. "What?" Vahanian barked.

"Absolutely necessary, Doctor; absolutely," whined Drupesti.

"What?"

"Big field problem; no time to explain: I'll patch you in."

The screen jumped, and chaos filled it. Vahanian took it in at a glance: outside, night, neon glare, undulating sign in the background: THE IRON BEGONIA. *That nightclub*, thought Vahanian, *up on Claramore. It's happened; oh, Jesus.* Copcars flashed their warning-lights; some had parked on the ground, some hovered in mid-air. A high fence of perforated metal rose about the club; it was full of watching faces, pressed tightly together, drinking in the devastation.

As Vahanian had expected, there were two bodies, one already being bagged, another sprouting nose-tubes and blood-pumps. The face of a woman, pale and harassed, hove into view; a paramedic, but not one from the hospital to which Vahanian was attached: she wore the white snood of a Sister of Mercy. "All right, paramedic; you're coming through," snapped Vahanian. "What's going on here?"

"Doctor Vahanian," said the Sister. "I'm Angela Surrey. We have two jumpers. One's dead, the other's on his way. No chance of recovery: tremendous amount of spinal damage, and he's losing blood as fast as we pump it in. Doctor Merrivac diagnosed."

"Then what in hell did you call me for?" yelled Vahanian. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Doctor, the jumpers—" The paramedic's face vanished and was replaced by that of Chief Inspector Henrietta Cloud. Cloud was a heavy-jowled woman with snow-white hair and red-rimmed eyes; Vahanian knew her well.

"My fault, Leo," said Cloud. "These two were patients of yours: Philippe Mondrian and George Just."

"Gautama Buddha," said Leo Vahanian. "Close-up." The Net obliged, zooming in on the bodies. Mondrian was the dead one; his blond curls were just disappearing into the body-bag. *Well, well, Mondrian*, thought Vahanian. *We've come a long way together, boy, from that table where I had them build you all those super bioenhancements. Everyone I know watched your shows.* "Patch in George's readings," Vahanian ordered the unseen paramedic. The picture on the Net screen compressed to two-thirds its normal size, and the remaining third began to flow with sta-

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tistics. "Cloud," Vahanian snapped. "Merrivac's right. How did this happen?"

"I think it was a double homicide," said the Chief Inspector. "That's one of the reasons I wanted you called, aside from our responsibility to notify you as their private physician. I need a brain-drain authorization from you, Leo."

"Absolutely not," said Vahanian.

"I need it now," continued Inspector Cloud. "No witnesses but these two, and Mondrian's noggin's colder than last month's chili."

"Inadmissible evidence," said Vahanian.

"Maybe," said Cloud coolly, "and maybe not. A lead, anyway. He can't last, Leo."

"Doctor," said Sister Surrey off-screen. "If you're going to drain him, you've got to do it right away."

Vahanian chewed his moustache for four seconds. *Hell*, he thought. *In the end it won't make a bit of difference anyway.* "Authorized," he told the Net. "I'll do the talking. Sister, monitor for me. Get an HTL bleed going. Hurry it up, and Henrietta, stay the hell out of the way." Inspector Cloud grinned toothily, and left the screen. Vahanian saw her reappear in the background, waving her arms at an HV crew. Vahanian smiled to himself. *My fellow soulsuckers*, he thought. *They got there pretty damn quick.* A floating mobile camera unit was in dispute: Cloud wanted it berthed, and the reporters wanted it closer in to the action. *I wonder which one's Old Bugeye*, thought Vahanian. *Maybe George called all the cameras that. They do look like eyes, actually.* He watched paramedic Sister Surrey connect the drain-pads to George's ruined skull.

Her voice came to him. "HTL bleed affirmative," she said. "Go ahead, Doctor: you're plugged into the cortex directly." She might have been talking about the time of day. *That's what you're supposed to be, Vahanian,* the doctor thought. *Objective. Last time for George, kiddo; last duty for the Network, and you can wash your hands of the whole mess. Do this right.* He waited until the pattern on the left third of the screen had stabilized, and began to speak, softly into the ears of the Net:

"George, can you hear me?"

George, can you hear me?

Oh, God, Mondrian! Why did you do it? It could have just been a cruise, just another Satnite, like when it was Halvo and you and me. I wouldn't have even minded Old Bugeye, not really. Oh, I didn't like the cameras, it's true, particularly in the beginning, but I don't know if it was the cameras as much as what we had to do in front of them, and our never being able to get away from them, ever, except when we were asleep. Oh, I'm afraid, I'm—

There's nothing to be afraid of, George.

What?

George, this is Leo. There's nothing to be afraid of.

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Doctor Leo? What are they doing in my head?

George, tell me what happened. Tell me about Mondrian. What did Mondrian do that you wish he hadn't?

Mondrian's dead, Doctor Leo.

Tell me about Mondrian when he was alive.

I used to watch him in the common Net; you know, the one for us grunjes downtown, in the Park. I'm sorry, Doctor Leo: low-lifes, not 'grunjes;' I know you don't like me using street-slang. Oh, but Mondrian! He was the strongest man in the world. We watched him; we knew. He could run faster than anybody else. He could climb like a rat. He saved babies who were burning up. He stopped those guerrillas from kidnapping the Mayors. He was tall, with yellow hair. The Network made him that way. Not just with special HV effects; no, for really real. Before he signed on to do his show, he was just like anybody. He worked for the WestEur Net in some office. Then he had that accident, and it was his lucky break. He signed over what was left of his body to the Net people, and they remade him so he could see in the dark and hear you whisper a room away if he turned his head just so and he smelled, God, he smelled like a summer back when there was that tree on display in the Park. My God, Mondrian's dead!

Sister Surrey, bleed George some more HTL.

Yes, Doctor.

George, think about the good times. Think about Satnite, about you and Halvo and Mondrian. You can use slang if you want; I don't mind. Talk to me, George. What was it like?

Oh, the cameras ate us up then. We'd strut the Avenue arm in arm, and nobody could say us nay, Halvo in her body armor, me in my bare skin and leather nasties, and Mondrian just like himself, glowing to beat a star. He really did glow, in real life, I mean, not just in the HV's: it started at his feet and worked its way up to the top of his head, pure and pearly and lovely, like Christmas. Halvo would swing that whip, she would, taking sparks off the pavement. "I'm ready!" she'd say. "Are you ready, Rutmates?" I'd say, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be," it would be in the script for me to say that, and then Mondrian would smile that smile, oh, and leap the way he could, up above our heads and the heads of the gawking grunjes, and turn three somersaults.

Then he'd clap his hands and his generator pack would let rip with a light discharge. The Avenue would skip and boil with every color you ever saw! That was real, too, not just a special effect. The grunjes loved it. They'd hoot and jump up and down, those grunjes, the ones with legs, and there was a little fella we used to see all the time who'd jump up and down on his hands.

Then Mondrian would open his mouth and whisper, "Satnite." Just like that. "Satnite." I couldn't do it like him, but it was like he was making love to the whole city with that one word, wrapping himself around it and pushing into it and making it his, just with a whisper.

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He'd glow and glow; he'd outglow the sidewalk lights along the Avenue; he'd send Halvo's armor into a moonbeam dance. I could feel that glow on my face; then he'd turn his eyes down to me, and that glow would shoot down my spine into where I live and I'd know it was my night, my Satnite, and that he was king of it.

Then he'd be back down putting his arms around Halvo and me, and he'd say, "Let's do it for the Goddess, children," and we'd go.

Go where, George?

Wherever the script told us to.

To the Iron Begonia?

Sometimes. Not a lot. That was a Special; it always cost the Begonia people a lot of money for us to show up there. Two, three times a year, maybe. Then we didn't for a while because of the badness between Mondrian and me.

When did the badness start between you and Mondrian?

Can't say.

When did it start, George?

Can't say.

Why not?

Because they'll make me eat my heart.

Who will?

The Sisters. The Sisters of Mercy. Don't tell them, Leo, oh God, don't tell them.

Doctor Vahanian?

Yes, Sister Surrey?

That's a common paranoia among street people. That field paramedics somehow cause death, that it follows us about. The indigents often accuse us of euthanasing nonterminals.

I see. Sister, he's beginning to disassociate. I'm afraid we'll have to stimulate direct regression. Begin a hyperphenyl, line B.

With this much HTL in his system, Doctor?

Considering the shape he's in, Sister, does it matter?

Suddenly, George's memory rises to confront him, and the day that first leaps out of the throng is the day he first met Philippe Mondrian. Some years earlier, George had made a nest for himself out of plastic crates in an alley adjoining the Two Moons Restaurant, and the owner of the eatery had let him be in return for his services as rat-catcher. In those days, George was a good rat-catcher. For one thing, he was short, not quite four feet tall; he could get into places normal adults could not. For another thing, he was very swift, and possessed a tracking sense nothing short of uncanny. He ate the rats and made his clothing out of their skins.

He had never known his parents; he had never lived in a house. He could not read, but many people could not, even wealthy, normal people; the Net made literacy less important than it had been. Oh, how he loved

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the Net. On the days when his sores were not running, George walked the forty blocks to the Park, and watched *Tales of Mondrian* on the huge common screen. Had George possessed a credit rating (nobody used money any more) he would have filled his hidey-hole with Mondrian pix and Mondrian knick-knacks; since he had none, he filled his dreams with the man himself. Very late one night he was awakened by sounds of a scuffle outside his nest, and you may imagine his feelings when, peering around the edge of a crate, he saw Mondrian in the flesh.

Two nuns were fighting him. They had saffron robes and no hair; George could tell the color because the floating cameras recording the scene had lit up the alley. The first nun hit Mondrian in the solar plexus with her unshod foot. The second jumped onto his back and began biting his sternocleidomastoid (look it up). The first one moved to hit him again, but he rolled, bringing the nun on his back directly into her cohort's foot. Something snapped. "Abductor hallucis, meet seventh cervical vertebra," cried Mondrian. He was not winded. The first nun had fallen down; he broke her neck with a quick thrust of fist and left the two women twitching together on the alley floor.

"Hooray," said George. He clapped. Mondrian did a standing broad jump twelve feet straight upward to where an ancient sign hung rakishly at an angle. "Mondrian," said George, "get away. They'll be coming for you!"

"Who, little one?" came the rich voice from above. The cameras still hummed.

He's talking to me, thought George. *Mondrian is talking to me!* For the first time in his life, he did not feel ashamed of his dwarfishness. "The police! They'll catch you for killing those two!"

"You seem concerned."

"Of *course*," said George. "I love you. Everybody does."

"Come out where I can see you better." George climbed from his nest and stood shyly in the cameralight. "What's your name?"

"George."

"George whom?"

"Just George."

Mondrian laughed, and George nearly fainted with pleasure. "Just George. George the Just. You seem undaunted by the murders you've just witnessed."

"They came at you first."

"So they did." Mondrian leaped again, and landed beside the nuns. The light caressed his broad chest and strong arms, and the lump in George's throat suddenly became as big as the world.

"You're beautiful," he breathed. "You're the most beautiful thing there is. We all think so. You're better than the Timehoppers and Teddy the Tumblebunny and Moko Javvis put together." George had always wanted to say these things to Mondrian; all at once, he feared his boldness. He turned and bolted, back toward his nest.

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Mondrian barred his way. "Don't go," he said. He was glowing, feet to head, just as he did on HV. His glow surrounded them both. He squatted, so as to be nearer George's height, and the muscles in his calves bunched. "I want to show you something," he told George. "Look at them, the nuns." George did as he was bid. "Touch them. Go ahead. Go up to them and touch them. They're not real." George tiptoed over to the corpses, which had stopped twitching, and laid a hand on one dead arm. He jerked his fingers away.

"Cold," he said.

"Yes," said Mondrian behind him. "Far too cold for a real corpse; it takes a long time for the blood in a body to lose its heat." George backed away from the nuns. "Fear not, my George; they're just skinbags."

"Z-zombies!" George scurried to Mondrian's side.

"It's all right. They're just robots, made out of body parts. They look real when I hit them for the holos, and Goddess knows there's no shortage of replacements! The studio controls them long-distance." Mondrian touched George's nose with one long strong finger; the dwarf felt a tiny zap of power, like static electricity. "I'm an actor, George. What you just witnessed was a scene. I did what my script told me to do."

"A scene?" said George. "Not real?" He hardly heard; his legs felt weak. *Don't go away yet,* he thought. *Oh, please.* "What about Mother Angina? What about the Chaos Brigade?"

"They're made up for the show."

"But they tried to kill you! I saw them, in the Net!"

"That was pretend." The cameras continued to hum. Mondrian began stroking George's matted hair.

"You're not pretend," said George. "You're strong. You can see in the dark. You have power; I know. We watch you. You jumped just now." He searched Mondrian's face, and saw him nod.

"Yes. I really do all the things you see me do."

"You're the best!"

"Because the Network built me to be." And Mondrian told George all about it: who he had been; his accident; which body parts they had replaced and which they had merely augmented. He told George why they had chosen Chicago for the debut of the first real-life cyborg superhero action and romance show (almost real-time, too: only one hour delay between filming and broadcast!); what he had done with the millions he had earned so far. George heard all of this and understood little. What he did understand, mostly from what he saw down deep in Mondrian's eyes and heard at the edges of his well-modulated voice, was enough. When Mondrian had finished talking, George reached out, trembling, and took his hand.

"I'll be your friend," he said.

We're too far back, Leo. Can you hurry this up?
Dammit, Commissioner, butt out of this!

END CRUISE

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We don't have much time, Leo.

All right, Henrietta. Brain functions holding steady; I'm going to bring him forward. George, do you hear me?

They're hurting me.

Who are, George?

The doctors. They're taking off my legs, one at a time. They're doing something to my arms. Mondrian said it wouldn't hurt, but it does.

What's he referring to, Leo?

His operation, Henrietta. The one Mondrian financed. I planned it; it's how I met them.

I don't understand. Operation?

Obviously you've never seen early holos of George, Commissioner. He was achondroplasic, a dwarf. His long bones never grew in properly. Many indigents are stunted, ask Sister Surrey; it may be a side-effect of the Q-420 the City uses to disinfect the ghettos. When Mondrian ran into George, the Network decided George would make a good supporting character. So they bought new limbs for him, cleaned him up, put him in the show.

That was nice of them.

It was just good HV, Henrietta. George, can you hear me?

George and Mondrian met Halvo in the Iron Begonia. It was George's first night out as New George, his very first Satnite, really; of course Old George had never gone anywhere for fun, except to the Park, or ratting. "I'm tall," he kept saying. "I can see up high, Mondrian!"

Mondrian was a glory of muscle and light and blue eyes, George a restless ball of hair and black leather strapping, but the two of them already moved as though they belonged together. "It's Satnite!" shouted Mondrian, as they pranced with the cameras down the Avenue. "Feel your strength, my loves!" The grunjes hooted and grunted and growled. A wasted sugarsipper veered close to them. George had seen her type before; they made corpses you could never eat, because their bodies were full of sarcomane, an illegal substance which had long since replaced heroin at the parties of the world. She was thin as the tube the paramedics would soon be forced to feed her through, and Mondrian's glow touched her black gauze with violet. "It is Satnite, my love!" he cried to her.

"I would die for you, Mondrian!" she shrieked.

"Live for me, child," said Mondrian, and the crowd wept at his compassion. They moved with the cameras past an intersection; a lay paramedic, bent over a dying grunj, looked up briefly at them. "Good Satnite, Sister!" called Mondrian.

"Good Satnite, Mondrian," she replied.

"Why did you call her 'Sister?' " whispered George. "She's not a Sister of Mercy."

"All women are my sisters, all men my brothers," said Mondrian. The crowd cheered. Mondrian lifted his hands and his voice. "Weekend, friends!" he cried. "Week is ended, cares are mended, life's begun and

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death is tended! Behold my beloved George, who is one of you!" George shook his fists above his head with joy. "We celebrate his regeneration! On this Satnite of Satnites, we go to the Iron Begonia!"

"The Begonia!" roared the crowd. "The Begonia!" There had been teasers on the holos for weeks; only three or four per cent of all the adults in the City had actually sampled the delights of the nightclub, and Mondrian's semiannual penetration of it had supplanted the Fourth of July, Kennedy Day, and Thanksgiving in the imagination of the masses. The throng cheered; those who could not cheer thumped the pavement with parts of their bodies. From the night sky, a limousine descended, bedecked with flowers; the door opened, and Mondrian and George stepped inside. "The Begonia, the Begonia!" roared the crowd, and the limousine rose and raced.

Upper Avenue lay spread below George like a field of jewels. The cameras caught his wonder, and his gratitude, and a dozen sponsors drank toasts to Leo Vahanian. At one point they passed over a police barricade; bodies lay here and there, and Sisters of Mercy padded among them. Mondrian kissed George. When George recovered, the limousine had descended to a landing pad similarly flower-decked, and there before them was the Iron Begonia. George had never even seen pictures of it—he had missed Mondrian's HV specials—and he was a little disappointed at first. It was simply a building of cream plastic, surrounded by high fences, lit by a sign that seemed to ripple in the air. Its front door stood open to darkness, like a mouth. George saw faces behind the fences; he caught the glint of metal and the glow of jewelry. For a Mondrian special, the Begonia was barred to its regular customers.

"I'm inside and they're outside," murmured George.

Mondrian lifted him out of the car by his leather harness and held him at arm's length. "Are you ready, my love?" he asked George. The cameras purred. To George it seemed as though Mondrian had undergone a subtle change. His hair seemed wilder, his skin ruddier, his eyes abruptly filled with purpose, as though they looked out on a matter of immense moment. *My first script,* thought George. "Are you ready?" Mondrian asked him.

"You know," said George.

Mondrian put him down, and they leaped into the dark mouth of the open door together.

What then, George?

We did things.

You said you met Halvo that night, in the Begonia.

There were bodies. He wasn't Mondrian any more. I'd missed the Begonia shows, when Mondrian had done them before; I'd never seen him like—like the way he was then. He was beautiful, but scarey. Those Bugeyes followed us all over.

Where was Halvo? How did you meet her?

Some shugs brought her. It was all in the script, only I didn't know.

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Sugarsippers, Leo. Sarcomane addicts.

Thank you, Commissioner. I know what they are.

He told me, "It's what the viewers want." We were all his, that night. It didn't seem bad, what he did, till you thought of somebody less wonderful than Mondrian doing it. Well, it hurt some.

Were you angry with Mondrian afterwards?

No! Well, yes—but not—oh, God, he's dead!

Didn't you meet Halvo in the Sea Room?

George found Halvo floating like an embryo in an aquamarine womb of a pool. He had stumbled into this area of the Begonia to get away from the pheromone mists and the rutmusic and the thrashing bodies and the driving power of Mondrian. He was scarcely aware of the camera following him, and it was not until he slipped into the water and felt the sting of antiseptic that he noticed that he was bleeding, in many secret places. Mondrian had been savage. He made for the woman, and when he came abreast of her, he saw the pink cloud in the water around her that told him she had been bleeding, too. He could not remember having seen her with Mondrian; he wondered how she had received her wounds. "Come on," he said, concerned for her. "Wake up. Wake up." Her face was under water. He touched her hesitantly. When she did not respond, he turned her over and cradled her in his arms.

She opened her eyes. "Let me go or I'll kill you," she said.

George let go. The woman uncurled and stood up in the pool. She was taller than he, nearly as tall as Mondrian. She had ebony skin that might have been natural and might have been a product of melanin implants. She also had things in her nose, which George realized had to be respirators. "I thought you were hurt," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. They were sharp, like her nails. "You mean, these?" she asked. She fingered the long scratches on her abdomen and grunted. "All in a Satnite's work. Some of those sippers get plenty mean for stimulus." She looked him up and down. "You're no shug," she said.

"I'm just George."

"Not Mondrian's George." She did not glance at the camera.

"Yes."

Her lip curled. "Not any longer. You're mine." She made a move toward him. George was ready to fight her, not for his freedom but for Mondrian's right to own him; he stood his ground and she stopped.

"What's your name?" George asked her.

"Why, I'm Halvo the Homicidal Whore. I have sex with people; then I kill them." She took another step toward him. Mondrian had told George generally what to expect of the evening, but he had said nothing about Halvo, and George wondered what to do. He was spared a decision by Mondrian's entrance, with a second camera. His limbs were streaked with blood and sweat, and where they touched the water, they stained it. George splashed to his side, clumsy in his relief.

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"Mondrian, this lady says I belong to her."

"Oh, I'd forgotten," said Mondrian with amusement. "We're to fight, Halvo and I. Well, Sister, let's get on with it."

They fought. Halfway through the fight, George realized that although the encounter had been arranged for the sake of the holo cameras, the battle was real, and for the first time he wondered what would happen to him if Mondrian lost. Mondrian won. "Shall I break your back or drown you?" he asked Halvo.

"Don't," said George. Mondrian raised an eyebrow, and Halvo looked astonished. "I'm not worth it."

"We could be a team," suggested Halvo. "The three of us." Mondrian pretended to consider the scripted question, then released his hold on the Homicidal Whore. "Thanks, George," she said, straightening prettily. "You saved my life."

"Can we go now?" George asked Mondrian. Mondrian smiled.

"Sorry, dear heart," he said. "I've got to degrade her now. It's in the script. We'll go home tomorrow."

He degraded her far into the night.

Leo?

God damn it, Henrietta, what did I tell you about staying out of this?

Leo, if George did it—pushed Mondrian off, then fell himself—the root of it could be here. You know: Idol Has Feet of Clay. This might have been where the seeds were planted.

Kill him? Oh, my God! Doctor Leo, I didn't—tell them I'm not—

Damn you, Commissioner! Sister Surrey, we need more hyperphenyl. George, it's vital that you remember more for me. You and Halvo and Mondrian started doing scripts together; you went on tours. Remember?

Oh, yes. The party in Amsterdam. We killed that man in the orange shirt. He was a spy; it was in the script. And we saved all those children in Tokyo. That was nice. Halvo wanted to buy some of them, but Mondrian wouldn't let her. In Switzerland there was snow.

Leo, get him to focus.

Leave this to me, Commissioner, will you please? George, when did Mondrian start to change? When did the badness happen between you? Was it in Switzerland?

Not then. Switzerland was nice. He covered us in chocolate and ate it off. I told him it would make him fat, but Halvo said no, it was left-handed sugar and it couldn't make him fat. Mondrian said even if it had been right-handed sugar he could have burned it all up.

When did Mondrian start to change, George?

In November.

November came to Chicago like an old woman looking for trouble: shrill and shaking, with a knife-edge of cold. Although the cameras were still with them, the three had earned a month free from scripts, and

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Mondrian had decided to throw a party. He had trisected his penthouse to give George and Halvo places to stay; on this occasion, he locked away all his valuables and took down the partitions. Some guests attended by two-way holo; most came in person, and the vast suite of apartments was filled. Like ancient Chinese wives, the cameras followed Mondrian, George, and Halvo at a discreet distance, but the eyes missed nothing. Bodies glittered and illegal compounds fizzed.

The evening dazzled George. Although he had emerged from the hospital contracted to the Network, he had met none of his producers and writers; that night he bumped into them at every turn. "They keep touching me," George said to Halvo. "They keep saying how hot I am. What does that mean?"

The Homicidal Whore had had too much to drink. "You're alive, Georgie," she said. "Anybody feels hot to a corpse."

"You mean they're skinbags?" George exclaimed. He had had to work with, around, and under a number of animated bodies since his encounter with the killer nuns, and he felt no more at ease with them than he ever had. Halvo guffawed.

"You're sweet, George," she said. A robot rolled by, an antique resembling an end table on wheels; Halvo snatched a drink off its tray. "I hope you never find out how sweet you are. Where are you going on vacation?"

"Mondrian hasn't said." Mondrian was across the apartment, playing the sun to a system of ten hangers-on. "What about you?"

"I'm off to Io to see my honey."

"You have a partner?"

"Don't act so surprised, pignuts. You think I'm in this business for the fun of it?" Halvo idly flipped her left breast. This was not difficult for her: her costume was fashioned of one of the new high surface tension liquid fabrics; it left little of her inaccessible. "He's a hormone engineer; we met when I was filming *Rings Around Uranus*. We're working toward buying a place on a sat."

"I wish," began George, and stopped.

"I know what you wish," said Halvo, "and you can just forget it. It'll never happen."

"What won't?"

Halvo stuck her dark face close to his. She often did this in a script, but when they were acting her eyelids never drooped, and her breath never stank. "Mondrian won't ever be your partner, that's what'll never happen."

George stood up so suddenly that Halvo fell over. Someone came up to him and said something; he did not respond, and the person went away again. "We're partners now," George said to Halvo.

"In what sense?" asked the Whore.

"We just are."

"Physically? Yes, on camera. In front of Bugeye."

"Bugeye's always there. So what?"

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"Spiritually?" She grinned a grin, not sunny like Mondrian's, but feral. "Intellectually? What do you two talk about when I'm not around, hm? Ellis-Van Creveld Syndrome? The flow mechanics of fluid draperies?"

"Don't," said George. "I don't understand you when you talk like this. We just talk. About places we've been together. About you. About the wind. About—the Avenue, and people we've met at the Begonia. What does talking have to do with it?"

Her eyes were bleak. "It's a script, George," she said.

"What?"

"You, me, him. Us living here. It's a script. You think he fell in love with you in that stinking alley of yours? Think he took you in out of the goodness of his heart? They replaced his heart years ago, with something more efficient. You were written in, same as I was, kiddo. Two barren souls brought to flowering by Apollo."

"Of course I'm in the script. I know that. He told me. I knew that."

"You don't follow me," said the Whore. She pulled him down to his knees, down to his old level. "His love for you is part of the script, too. Haven't you ever read *Pygmalion*?"

"I can't read," said George. He pushed her away and stood up. The party fluoresced around them. He went out onto a balcony and looked out at the Avenue illuminating the fog far below. He knew that whatever the truth was, he was better off than he had been before he had met Mondrian. Someone touched his arm. "Go away," said George.

"You look awful," said Mondrian. His beard was a pale curl against his throat. "The party will be over soon; it's winding down."

"Go away," said George again. The camera hummed in the doorway. "I mean, I'm sorry; I'm sick, I'll go away. It's your apartment and I don't know the script." He tried to rush past Mondrian, and as usual, Mondrian was swifter.

"I thought I heard Halvo sliming me," said Mondrian. His frown was a fury. "What did she tell you?"

Bugeye continued to watch. "What should I say?" asked George. "You always tell me, 'Just be yourself in a scene, George.' I'm tired now; I don't know which self to be. Will you let me by, please?"

Mondrian gripped him by the shoulders. "What did she say to you, my heart?"

"Ask Bugeye," said George. "I bet he got it all down."

After that, things were different between you?

Mondrian said we were partners for real, not just for the Network. We did things together off-camera.

Off-camera?

Yes. Mondrian said the producers would let us have privacy if it meant keeping me in the show. He said I was important to the ratings. He said all the grunjes loved me, because I was one of them, and they lived it all through me. Do you know I met the President's husband?

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When did they take Bugeye away, George?

After I came out of the hospital. The cameras were still around for our script scenes, but they went away when we needed them to.

When were you put in the hospital? Why?

You know, Doctor Leo. You were there.

Tell me, George. For the record. My friend Henrietta needs to hear it from you.

Well, they had to fix my right leg. One night Mondrian and I went to a restaurant and when I tried to get up my leg wouldn't work where they'd lengthened it. So I went to the hospital, and when I came out my head hurt, but my leg worked, and Bugeye was gone when we wanted him to be.

Your head hurt?

Yes, Doctor Leo. I had earaches and eyeaches. You said they were tension.

He's sounding very distant, Leo. You've got to get him stronger.

Commissioner, please. This is where it gets tricky. We're very close to the present, now, very close to the central trauma. I wish you'd let me handle the questioning.

I'm an antsy old woman, Leo. Wait a minute, Sister Surrey. Who's that behind you?

She's from the Network, Commissioner. She says she's here to inspect the damage.

Damn it, I'm Commissioner around here, that ought to count for something! What does she think she's going to do, reclaim George's legs? Keep her away from here till this is all over.

Yes, Commissioner.

George, this is Doctor Leo again. Can you hear me? How did Mondrian come to the Begonia tonight? Was he sad? Was he angry? George?

I can't! They'll cut out my heart!

Henrietta, it's not going to work. He's blocking the hyperphenyl. I'm afraid it's no use.

No use? We'll see about that. George!

Who are you?

George, this is Henrietta. I'm Doctor Leo's friend. George, I know you didn't kill Mondrian. Do you hear me? I know you didn't kill Mondrian.

I loved Mondrian!

I know you did. You've got to help me find the person who killed him. You know who it is, don't you?

Ask Bugeye.

Why ask Bugeye, George?

He knows.

How does Bugeye know, George? I'm Doctor Leo's friend; you can tell me.

He knows because he never went away. They lied to me. Mondrian lied to me. Doctor Leo lied to me! They did something to my leg to make it

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bad, so I had to go into the hospital, so they could put Bugeyes in my eyes and ears.

This is Henrietta, George. Tell me, sweetie. Tell me the rest of it.

When George came home from the hospital, he discovered that Halvo had left Netrutting and had gone back to her partner on Io. Mondrian and George began a half-year sweet as sarcomane. On camera, they broke up a child slavery ring in Montreal; they rescued an heiress, supposedly virgin, from the clutches of the Ku Klux Klan; they sailed a sunpowered skiff around the isles of Greece, hunting spies; they braved the graveyard of the Amazon and ravished a hundred willing natives, mostly female. Off-camera, ostensibly, they walked through Lastwoods in California, enjoyed what remained of the sequoias; they spent a rollicking week as lay brethren in a monastery at the North Pole; they read books of poetry (Mondrian read, George listened); they touched one another in ways that did not often involve ravishment, or even union, but combined the pleasures of each. George's headaches worsened in stages. Each time they reached a new plateau of pain, he complained of them, and chilled to Mondrian's withdrawal.

They threw other parties. At one of them, a doe-eyed young woman approached George for sexual favors, and he frightened himself and her by the intensity of his acceptance. At another, a grey-haired sculptor told him he was ugly and stupid but had beautiful legs, and George threw the man into a fountain. This scared him, too. Mondrian only laughed. "You're becoming yourself," he said. "You're growing up."

"Why should I care what part of me people like?" asked George. "I should be glad they like me at all. I'm just a grunj with long bones."

"You do have beautiful legs. The man was right."

George blinked. "They're the Network's legs, not mine. Only the ugly parts of me are mine. That, and my caring for you." He brightened. "That's not ugly!" George thought that saying this would spark another smile from Mondrian; instead, Mondrian looked troubled, and did not say anything for the rest of the day.

That is how it happened, step by step, hour by hour, until the last Satnite.

It had been a long and difficult day of filming. The cameras had been everywhere, swift and more relentless than usual. The scene, George thought, was silly: he was tied up to a cross, pretending to be tortured by some villains who were really just remote-controlled skinbags; the set was littered with parts of bodies. He began to grow impatient, waiting for Mondrian to knock in a door and rescue him. One of the skinbags, a tall one dressed in a red robe and hood, was getting more and more violent; before long, the whip the zombie was holding began to really sting, and George began to cry out in real pain. At that moment, before the cameras, the sadistic skinbag whipped off its hood and stood revealed as Mondrian.

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"Mondrian!" cried George. The cameras closed in, catching the men's expressions; then they winked their CAMERA OFF lights, and zipped out the window, bound for processing. George sighed and relaxed against his bonds. "You've been here all along?" he asked his partner. "I'm beat. I sure wish the tech people would get here; I want to go home. Mondrian, would you untie me?"

"Hush," said Mondrian. He raised his whip, and with fire in his eyes, lashed out with it. The leather caught George in the right cheek.

"Mondrian, what are you doing?"

"Hush," said Mondrian, and struck again.

Some time later, when the beating was over, George was barely conscious. He felt himself lifted from the cross, carried to an aircar, laid out in bed at the apartment. He swam back to full consciousness to watch Mondrian dress. "You're going out?" George managed.

"Yes. It's Satnite," said Mondrian. His voice was cold, cold.

"No script tonight, is there, Mondrian?" Mondrian did not reply. "Mondrian, where are you going?"

"The Begonia."

"But there's no script," said George. He added weakly, "I don't think I can."

"I don't want you with me."

"Oh," said George, and for the first time, he realized that some sort of ending was near. "Why?" he asked. Mondrian came over to him and stuck a heavy thumb hard on the bone below George's left eye.

"Because I don't want to be watched," he said, and left.

When George was able to stand, he could not see out of his left eye, and his ears were buzzing. He went into the bathroom and stopped before a mirror. Mondrian had written something on his forehead in blood. George thought of showering, then decided against it; he did not want to wash off what Mondrian had written, whatever it meant, because he had the terrible gut-empty feeling that it might be the last communication he might ever have from his lover. He went to the Net console and activated the company hotline. "Mondrian's crazy," he told the Net people.

"So we've noticed," they replied, not warmly. "We've had to cancel the series."

"What?" George's head swam. "Cancel Mondrian? You can't. Everybody loves him." His brain grasped at straws. "The shugs love him, the grunjes, everybody."

"Not after tonight, they won't," the company replied. "Where have you been, George? Check out the Iron Begonia." The hotline snapped sourly.

George remembered how quickly the Network had judged him and Halvo worthy additions to Mondrian's show. Mondrian had called it market projections. "The Net does it in a flash," he had said. "It analyzes probable audience reactions and makes split-second hiring, firing, and scripting decisions." *What could Mondrian do to make people hate him?*

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thought George. He discounted the beating he had received; no cameras had been present to relay it to an audience. As quickly as he could, George dressed, called a car, and flew up the night-blotched Avenue. Copcars were circling the Begonia. There were fires, and screams. Inside, there was worse.

He had to crawl over the bodies. Some were ice-cold, zombies brought in by necrophiliac patrons, but most were warm and some were alive. None had any eyes, and the ears of many had been mutilated. The Sea Room was full of blood. George found himself looking for Halvo, then remembered that she was on Io with her sweetie. When he could stumble no farther he found a robot in working order and said, "Take me to the roof." It dragged him to the elevator and they rose together.

Mondrian was there, disembowelling a mewing sugarsipper with a gold knife. George recalled having seen the knife at the apartment; it had been a gift to Mondrian from someone in Japan. The wind was strong on the roof; George could see the copcars hovering above them, but he could not hear their engines. He let go of the robot and crawled. Mondrian saw him, and began to glow, from foot to knee to trunk to chest to neck to tear-streaked grinning face. "Do it for the Goddess, children," he said. No wind could outproject him. "Look me over, George, so the folks at the Network have a good shot for their morning show."

"I don't understand," whispered George.

Mondrian's fabulous ears heard him. "Take a gander," said Mondrian. He nodded toward a Net-screen. Someone had left it on, and there they were, courtesy of the hour delay from filming to broadcast; or rather, there Mondrian was, dressed as an executioner, facing the camera. The sugarsipper's blood spotted the screen and hid some of the details.

George heard his own voice say, "You've been here all along? I'm beat. I sure wish the tech people would get here; I want to go home. Mondrian, would you untie me?"

He saw Mondrian the Executioner smile and raise his whip. "Hush," said the screen Mondrian. His eyes were on fire, just as George remembered them having been. Screen Mondrian lashed out with it. The whip passed to the right of the camera.

"Mondrian, what are you doing?" George heard himself say.

"Hush," said Mondrian on screen.

The show continued, but George did not watch it. "I said those things after the cameras left," he whispered. "*After* they left."

"Like hell," said Mondrian. "You're Bugeye now, kiddo. We've never been alone. I never will be. I'll always be theirs, body and soul. I thought I could take it; I even thought it would be fun." He grinned again, skin gleaming like Apollo's; then he bit through the sugarsipper's jugular vein. "I was wrong," he added.

George's right leg stirred. "Mondrian," he whimpered. "It's—I'm not—" His left leg followed suit. His legs sat him up, then stood him against the wind. *That's funny*, thought George. *They can make my legs move*

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when I don't want them to. I'm a zombie and I'm not even dead. "It's not my fault," he said to nobody in particular. His legs tensed, muscles ready. "Mondrian, this isn't a funny script. Stop me, please!"

Mondrian heard. Hope blossomed in his bloody face. George's legs rushed him forward so quickly that he did not realize what was happening until he had already pushed Mondrian over the edge of the building. They fell together, locked, he and Mondrian, arms and legs in loving embrace, Mondrian ablaze like a son of the morning, down to the earth below.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Vahanian," said Sister Surrey over the Netlink. "I couldn't drain any more. He was just too far gone. That's all I could get."

"That's all right, Sister," said Vahanian from his hotel room. Behind him in the bedroom, his partner called out. On screen, Commissioner Henrietta Cloud heaved a deep and sorrowful sigh. She turned from George's still body.

"My God," she said. "All that carnage. Leo, are you still listening?"

"Yes," said Vahanian.

"You knew, didn't you?" She did not wait for a reply. "My Christ, ratings wars! If they can predict trends so goddam quickly, why couldn't they predict Mondrian's instability and warn us, for God's sake? Those are people in there, Leo, real Satniters, not paid rutters and skinbag remotes!"

"Henrietta," said Vahanian, "it's not that simple."

"Not that simple?" She cast him a look of cold fury. A well-dressed young woman stood behind her; Cloud whirled on her. "You a Network person?" Cloud demanded.

"Yes, Commissioner. May we make our retrieve now?"

"No."

"Commissioner Cloud, we have our contractual rights in this matter. The body parts in question were leased to Messers Philippe Mondrian and George Just till brain-death. It is our right—"

"This is the end," said the Commissioner. Her nose was an inch from the young woman's. "You people are going to be investigated from here to Io and sued up your asses to boot. This was criminal negligence, criminal."

"Well, we'll see you in court," said the Net lady soberly, "but I fail to see how we're responsible for the actions of private citizens. Mister Mondrian was on his own time. Now," she continued, smiling at Cloud, "if we could examine the bodies?"

"Not till after the autopsies," said the Commissioner. "You people implanted surveillance devices within George Just without his knowledge or consent. The drain reveals that much. That's a crime."

The Net lady's smile grew fainter. "A brain-drain is not admissible evidence in a court of law," she hazarded. "Our lawyers can provide you with signed and fingerprinted documents proving, oh, anything neces-

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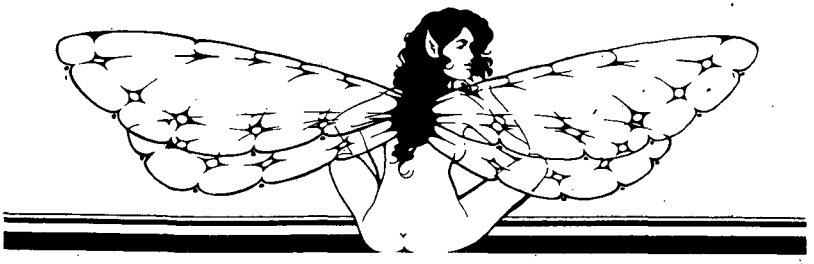
sary." She peered at George, glanced at Cloud, and began moving back to the Network vehicles. "By the way, Commissioner, you mustn't put too much store by the words of a dying man. George was sweet and much beloved, and we'll all miss him, but he wasn't what you'd call a class act, was he? Just between you and me, Ma'am, when we heard of the ruckus down here tonight, it only took the Network computer a second to figure that George could never carry *Tales of Mondrian* by himself. And with all the havoc here, what would the sponsors say? Ah, well."

"After the autopsies," said Commissioner Henrietta Cloud. The Net lady nodded, unruffled, and disappeared. "Signed and fingerprinted," repeated the old woman. "By whose hands, and when, I wonder?" She stuck her face close to the Net screen, startling Vahanian. "Do you know, Leo, dear? When was it that George signed those consent forms? Who held his hands and told him it was just a formality, there was nothing to be afraid of? Someone he trusted, perhaps? Someone who was medical consultant to the Network folks? Someone who had planned his long bones, perhaps, with a little something extra in the muscles in case remote control was needed in a dramatic emergency?"

"I just went to the hospital to see him," said Vahanian. "That's all, Henrietta. That's all I know."

"Gave them their privacy, did they?" said the Commissioner. "Only way to keep George in the show. Poor schmuck." The Net-screen caught a glimpse of George's face before the body-bag covered it. The word written on George's forehead in blood had dried brown, but it was still legible. It said, BUGEYE.

"Ah, well," said Henrietta Cloud. "It sure as hell made a grand finale." The show was in reruns for years. ●



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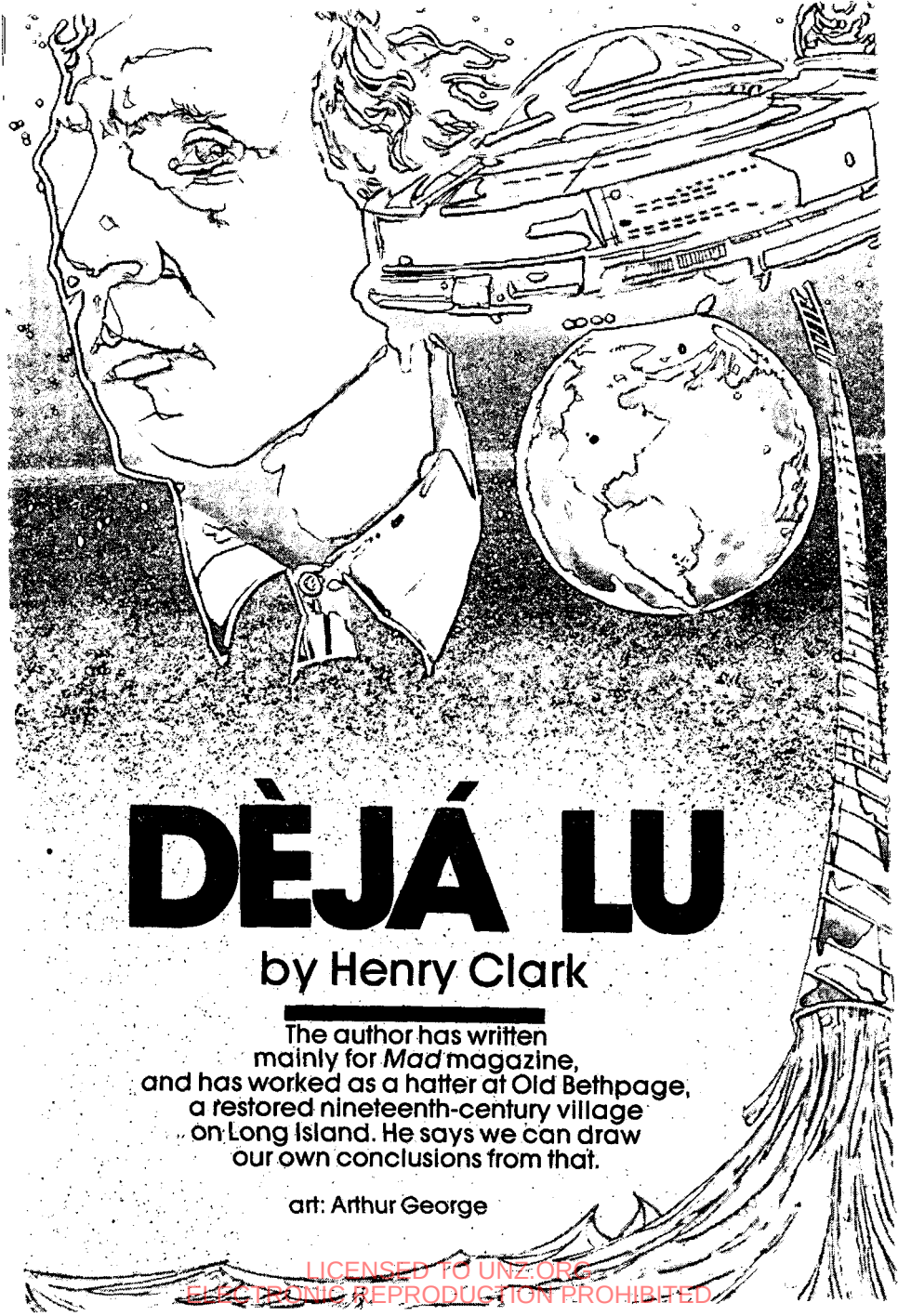

DÈJÁ LU

by Henry Clark

The author has written mainly for *Mad* magazine, and has worked as a hatter at Old Bethpage, a restored nineteenth-century village on Long Island. He says we can draw our own conclusions from that.

art: Arthur George

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Call me Ishmael. You might as well, since I'm a plagiarist. In a sense, I am Jacob Horner, but my real name is Bond, James Bond, and that's not true either. This is not going to be easy to set down.

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied and there I go again, caught myself this time but I don't always, what gave it away was that "nineteenth" when I meant to say twentieth.

Try again.

A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now, except maybe the sound the *Nansi* flagship made when it leveled Petropavlovsk, although I wasn't there and this is only a guess. The current scream springs from myself, as I have just this moment realized I've read the beginnings to many more stories than I've read endings and I may never get this thing rolling. Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these towels must show. You'll have to forgive me; I have an alien artifact lodged in my hippocampus.

Again.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and put more things in each than were dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy. Then one day about six months ago, some of those things, undreamt of by Horatio but not undreamt of by others, dropped down from the heavens and put a hammerlock on earthly commerce. That, at least, begins to sound like my own voice.

More or less.

The *Kanamit*, the *Kzinti*, the *Tralfamadorians*, the *Groaci*—cacogens all, their name was legion, they called themselves *Skreejon*, but everyone knew them as *Nansi*—deterred armed resistance by incising holes in the earth where defense plants had been. Military bases became skating rinks, their smooth glassy surfaces—without a hint of radiation, despite what lay buried beneath—proving suitable for nothing else. The *Nansi* conquered the earth in less time than it had taken Wells's Martians, and, going the Martians one better, had done it outside a fictional context.

The *Nansi* announced, drawing an analogy between themselves and nineteenth-century European visitors to Baden-Baden, that they had come to take the waters. They also left behind a book entitled *To Serve Man* after two of their dignitaries—unless it was *one* of their dignitaries, sporting two heads—visited the General Assembly, although Dr. Huer tells me that that book was found in *The Twilight Zone* and not the United Nations. My vivid memories of one of their egg-shaped ships hovering for days over the UN building she ascribes to the paramnesia induced by my hippocampal lodger, coupled with the voluminous reading I did as a child. (She, April Huer, my doctor, my darling, has promised to remove the lodger when conditions permit. She has acquired a scalpel

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to this end but quells my eagerness by reminding me that she is as much a prisoner here as I am. The *Nansi* may be gone, but their mechanical guards remain, patrolling the halls with measured tread, their human-like appearance sheathing death-dealing steel.)

They took the waters. Or at least tried to. Four days after the *Nansi* vanguard arrived, something enormous appeared in geosyncronous orbit, extruded a pipeline two kilometers in diameter down to the planet's surface, extruded a shaft of equal mass out into space, and began draining the seas. The *New York Times* correspondent filed from Taprobane, the headline announced INVADERS SUCK, and the *Times* building was slick and skateable before a second edition could hit the streets.

-30-

(Suction, of course, had nothing to do with it, despite the pipeline's resemblance to a gigantic drinking straw. The water was being lifted via a series of acceleration rings, a method of transport unsuspected by earth-side scientists and unexpected by the first scuba diver to swim accidentally into earth orbit. Said diver went into the water off the coast of Sri Lanka in a search for coral and resurfaced in the belly of the satellite, 22,000 miles up. He opened the door when the first expedition from earth arrived in its shuttle, after the *Nansi* had made their hasty retreat, and he endeared himself to his rescuers by forbidding their entry until they had wiped their feet. He was diagnosed as having a monumental case of the bends, aggravated by an unvarying diet of fish, and helped not a jot by the superstitious dread his surroundings had induced. Sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic, he took his rescuers on a tour of the satellite and unsettled them greatly by genuflecting at all the corridor intersections.)

The invaders were not the victims of drought. Early apologists assumed this, and argued persuasively that the earth could do without the Sea of Japan and Lake Huron, if they were expended to save a dying race. The *Nansi*, however, were not dying; were not interested in anything less than the sum total of the earth's waters; and would have had all of it within the space of two years at the rate their soda straw was slurping, had they not run afoul of me. Catastrophic climatic changes would have killed all life on earth long before the two years had elapsed, so it was just as well they found the Yoyodyne canister when they did.

Their own world, the third planet of Canopus, was a lush garden spot dripping with rain-forest. At the time of their visit to earth, they were merely touring the Local Group, collecting oceans, the way a lepidopterist might tour a meadow, collecting butterflies.

My own entry into the affair began some two weeks after their pipeline pierced the Indian Ocean.

It was on a bitterly cold and frosty morning during the winter of '97 that I was wakened by a tugging at my shoulder. It was Holmes. The candle in his hand shone upon his eager, stooping face, and told me at a glance that something was amiss. Mainly, that I had jumped the tracks

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again, that I had ripped the threads off my screw, that I was regurgitating false memories again when I thought I had the damned thing under control.

(April rushes in and consoles me here, massaging my neck as my fingers do spastic things on the processor's keyboard. The odds are too great; I can't get this done; there isn't even any tractor-feed paper for the printer, I've had to use a roll of paper-towels. *I must concentrate.*)

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?

Steady.

As a young man I had resolved to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. To this end I became a certified public accountant, favoring firms that habitually kept two sets of books. I was, by coincidence, the last person to leave the offices of Yoyodyne, a division of General Technics, before those offices and their surrounding factory were reduced to a gaping pit by a salvo from a *Nansi* cruiser. Yoyodyne, in addition to making a best-selling oven cleaner, was at the time also under GSA contract to supply the armed forces with jellied petroleum. (Jellied petroleum, usually called napalm, inflicts burns; petroleum jelly, usually called Vaseline, heals them. Take care when stocking your medicine cabinet.) Despite their belligerency-scanners having shown the building in bright vermillion, the *Nansi* soon had cause to regret their abrupt annihilation of the place.

The *Nansi* scientists took a sample of the ocean they were collecting. It was contaminated to an alarming extent. Whatever we know of the *Nansi*, we can take it on faith that their home world is not polluted, since their immediate response was to go looking for a saboteur. An empty Yoyodyne canister, which might at one time have contained anything from pesticide to battleship paint, was found floating near the spot where the sample was drawn. The *Nansi* let their mandibles do the walking, found the number, phoned Yoyodyne, got no response, sent an emissary. The emissary sent back word that 2485 Summit Street was a hole in the ground.

So it was not Holmes who woke me on that bitterly cold morning in the winter of '97 but Egtverchi, an assistant cartographer in the *Nansi* Bureau of Neural Mapping. I was informed that my own particular pattern of misfiring synapses—a sad, un*Nansi*-like product of alcohol-deadened dendrites—had been recorded as present in the Yoyodyne complex several hours prior to the strike, and that I happened to be the only one of the two verified survivors the Bureau of Neural Mapping had been able to trace. As such, I was being taken in for questioning.

As one who has never been able to believe more than five impossible things before breakfast, I put up a fight, but I was quickly subdued. I awoke an indeterminate time later in this place, which April calls the old Greenwood Sanitarium, but which, under the *Nansi*, is a place as congenial as Balfour VI, the prison planet where Captain Skyhammer

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and his men were trapped and cruelly tortured throughout one episode of *The E = Mc Squad.* (Give me credit for citing a source.)

Their interrogation of me was intense.

Believing an accountant might be carrying information in his head which he was unaware he possessed (or, more likely, which he was aware of but did not know how to assess), Egtverchi and his superiors questioned me relentlessly about Yoyodyne's finances: what was on the books and what was off, what they were buying and who they were firing, who they made contracts with and who walked through the room while I was doing the books, and particularly, did I know the identity of a Yoyodyne employee whose neural pattern had a bronze flare in the center with cilia gules dexter chief on an argent field? On none of which could I provide information which they found satisfactory, especially regarding the last, although as an undergraduate I had cheated on a metaphysics exam by looking into the soul of the boy sitting next to me, only that's a Woody Allen joke *and I must stop this!* Woody Allen's humor is full of angst; mine is full of *Pabst*, and I wish I had a bottle right now.

As more and more reports of soiled ocean came in from their scientists, my interrogators became more and more desperate, and at last decided that the information they needed might be buried in my mind at a subconscious level. An attempt would have to be made to extract it using the same mechanical means they had used to learn the location of the rest rooms in NGC4151, a Seyfert galaxy where the locals were understandably jumpy and consequently tight-lipped. (How much of this is misremembered? Some, but the gist is correct. It may not have been rest rooms, it may have been Eldorado, or the Seven Cities of Cibola, or the Paradise World, but accept it, for the moment, as written.) I was trepanned, and a tiny silver sphere was inserted in my brain. I was then resealed and questioned again.

And it all came spilling out.

And hasn't stopped.

In inserting their lodger into my memory complex they apparently short-circuited some of those misfiring synapses which they had so disdained, and rendered it impossible for me to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between what had happened to me, and what had happened to the characters in books and plays and movies I had encountered over the course of a long life of eclectic reading, theater-going, and television-watching. A polygraph would never have said I was lying. Their sophisticated monitoring equipment was baffled as well.

I told them about polywater. I told them that in addition to manufacturing Imipolex G, which was their world-renowned oven-cleaner, and synthesizing Flubber, which was their answer to Neoprene, Yoyodyne was also engaged in a clandestine defense project with the code-name *Ice-9*, the purpose of which was to create polywater. I told them that polywater, seeded into the world's oceans in even an infinitesimal amount, would expand geometrically, converting ocean water to poly-

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water, and soon engulf the globe with radically altered water molecules. I told them that this altered water would be inimical to life; that it was being developed as the ultimate Doomsday Device by Yoyodyne's Strangelove Division; and that the probable identity of the survivor they had been unable to find, with the bronze flare in his neural pattern, was Doc Savage, a research chemist who had been assigned to the polywater project and whose well-known "Live Free or Die" attitude had manifested itself in the slogan on his car's license plate and was no doubt behind his decision to seed the Atlantic with a canister purloined from the *Ice-9* project.

Upon the conclusion of my recitation there was such a clamor among my captors, such a scrambling over subordinate's carapaces in a mad dash for the door, that I could not help but be convinced I had been believed. It was reasonable, since I was unaware I had lied.

The *Nansi* shut down their ocean-draining machinery, packed up their invasion force, and departed. Behind them they left innumerable skating rinks, an abandoned satellite, and the Greenwood Sanitarium, the latter staffed with androids of such cunning design that the world outside has yet to suspect that a vestige of the *Nansi* regime remains, mindlessly maintaining a prison for the world's true liberator.

He will get his account finished, however.

He will weed out the involuntary plagiarisms.

He will get it past the guards; he will make sure the right people read it.

He will deliver himself as easily as he has delivered his planet.

"The idea of aliens who are unfamiliar with the concept of fiction is nothing new," says April, my wad of towels in her hand. The towels are designer towels, with a pattern—kitchen condiments—and since the printer is a dot-matrix model, using a typeface designed by the artist Seurat, it has at times been difficult for April to distinguish between my words and the grains of pepper shown falling from the bases of the pepper mills. For this reason, her attempts at critical assessment are suspect.

"We've established that as a child, you watched *The Twilight Zone*," she says. "I, too, watched it, as did most everybody growing up back then, and I seem to recall an episode featuring Andy Devine—you ever watch *Andy's Gang*?"

"Never."

"—an episode with Andy Devine, where he's captured by creatures in a flying saucer, and he tells them such tall tales about his abilities as a marksman and a mountain-mover that the aliens high-tail it away, they're so scared. They had never encountered fiction before. Remember it?"

"Not at all."

"And I suppose," she says, pausing dramatically, apparently having spent the morning working this out, "you'll say you've never seen *this*

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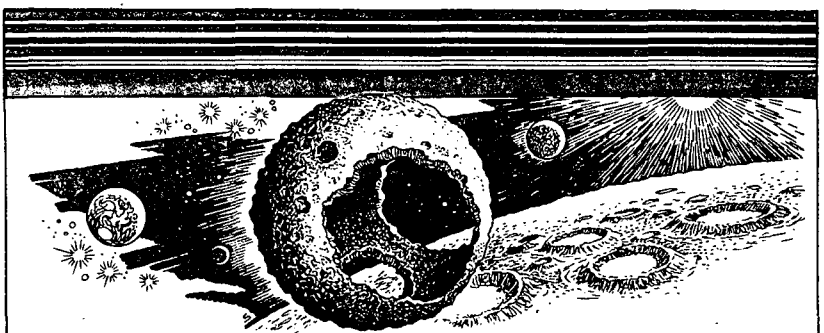
before!" She whips a magazine out of the folds of her robe and slaps it on the table, a gesture more appropriate to Perry Mason than to Rod Serling. She looks at me for reaction, gets none. The magazine is twelve years old, dated 1984, with a cover illustration as surreal as the moment.

"This," she says, dulling her scalpel by jamming its point into the tabletop, "is a magazine we've had here in the reading room for as long as you've been here. It contains a story entitled Dèjá Lu, which you have plagiarized not just in part but *in toto*, claiming all of its hero's improbable accomplishments for your own."

"I've never seen that magazine before in my life."

"You had to have; the story isn't good enough to have been anthologized. I think it's about time we got that silver ball out of your skull."

April has the cruelest mouth. ●



Forbidden Planets

(for Bruce Sogolow)

The horrible thing was little seen,
then by effect only. A bending
of the ship's stair, silent dust spore,
open hatch. Shapeless and vast
it shuffled along those flat horizons,
while one by one the crew succumbed;

till at last it came for them all.
They stood what ground remained
theirs. And outlined then by fire,
it finally took shape, became
just another monster, and manageable.

—James Sallis

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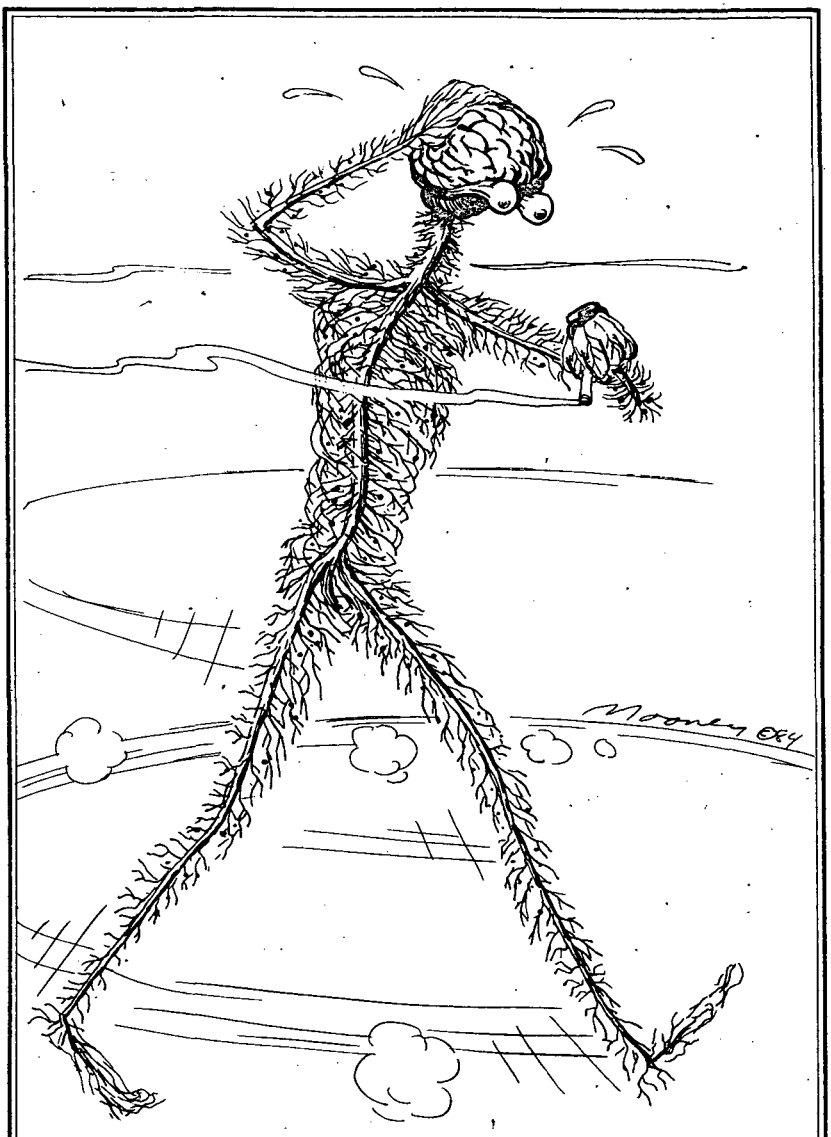

Fig.3: The Nervous System

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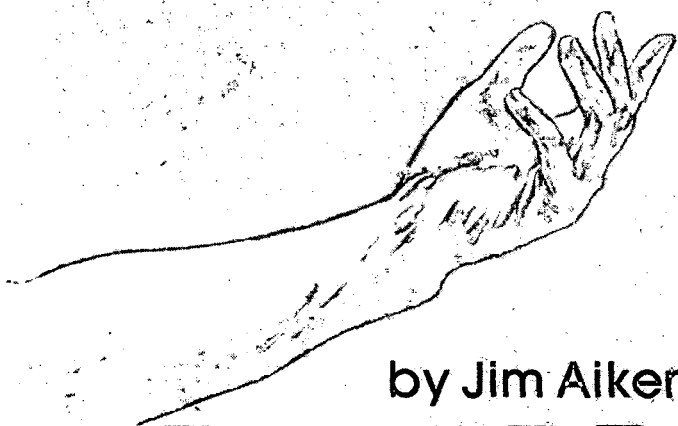

by Jim Aiken

STATUES

Jim Aiken is a writer and a musician who has lived in the San Francisco Bay area for more than twenty years. His interests include the Japanese board game Go, the Tarot, and human pre-history as it throws light on present-day cultures.

art: Robert McMahon

A word of warning: this story contains brief scenes which may be disturbing to some.

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All the way home from the bus station Aunt Edith chattered gaily about people Laura didn't know and places she had never been. It was too much trouble to pay attention, so Laura just sat and stared out the window. She wondered dully whether Aunt Edith was being so cheerful to make her feel welcome, or whether she made Aunt Edith nervous. There was some small pleasure in having the power to make somebody nervous, but it didn't last long. The car was hot and stuffy and full of Aunt Edith's perfume. Laura couldn't breathe, but there was no crank to open the window, only a confusing array of chrome buttons on the armrest. When Aunt Edith slackened momentarily to negotiate a left turn, Laura said, "Is there a—I'm not sure how you open the window."

"Oh, you don't want the window open, dear. It's freezing out. You wouldn't want to take a chance on catching a chill, not until you're better."

Laura frowned. Did Aunt Edith think she had had pneumonia? How much had Aunt Edith been told? At the thought that her aunt must already know everything, Laura cringed in shame. She shrank down in the seat and let Aunt Edith chatter on, interjecting only the occasional obligatory murmur. Even that took a great effort; she was tired, so tired. She hoped Aunt Edith already knew. That way Laura wouldn't have to try to explain. It was impossible to explain, impossible to do anything. The streets outside the window slid by in a meaningless blur.

She roused herself when Aunt Edith turned off onto a curving street posted with rural mailboxes and guided the car up a steep driveway. Laura knew that Aunt Edith and Uncle Henry had money. Ever since she was a little girl, she had looked forward to opening the box under the tree that came from them, because what was in it was always nicer than anything her parents could afford. But she had only imagined what their house must be like. The first thing she noticed was how unkempt the grounds were—certainly nothing like the grounds of a mansion in Illinois. The scraggly trees marching down the hillside looked like the remains of an orchard, and the gully off to the left was choked in brush. Maybe they weren't rich after all—maybe it had been a pretense to fool the relatives. Maybe they wouldn't be able to afford to have her stay, and she'd have to turn around and go home on the next bus.

But the house reassured her. At the top of the slope, it was a huge rambling place, white stucco and red tile roof in the Spanish style, with wrought-iron grills over the windows. They might do things differently in California, but a mansion was still a mansion.

Laura let out a sigh. She was really here. Maybe now she could make a fresh start. She remembered pulling up to another big white building a year ago in another car, and how she had looked forward to starting an exciting new grown-up life in college. The dorm looked so clean and pleasant, but later it became an evil place, where dreams turned sick and bloated, and suddenly Aunt Edith's house was full of slimy evil things too, dead things that wanted to crawl across her naked body and

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smother her and choke her, so she sat in the car trembling and didn't even try to figure out how to open the door while Aunt Edith went inside to fetch the maid to carry the suitcases, and when they came back they found that Laura had thrown up the bus-station breakfast all over her new winter coat.

The next morning when she awoke the room was quiet and cold and filled with silver light. After the vibration of the four-day bus ride, the stillness was as thick as cake frosting. She lay warm and cosy under the white blanket and looked around at the mirror on the dressing table, the lace curtains, the pale pastel wallpaper. Aunt Edith and Uncle Henry didn't have any children, so this wasn't a daughter's room where she was trespassing, only a guest room made to look like a daughter's room. Laura had always wanted to wake up in a room like this. This was the kind of room they gave you when you died and went to Heaven. For a while she had thought the hospital room was like a room in Heaven, but that was while she was still under sedation. The hospital room smelled of chemicals and pain and fear, and even after she was no longer quite so weak physically, she still felt drained and helpless there because nobody listened when she tried to tell them what she wanted. What she wanted was for them to go away and leave her alone, especially Mama. But Mama was always there, sitting at the side of the bed watching her with that dubious, wounded look, trapping Laura's hand between both of hers and scrunching her eyes shut while her lips moved in prayer. The praying was torture, because it kept Laura from forgetting why she was in the hospital. She screamed sometimes, and threw things, which only made Mama pray harder. This room was as cold and white as the hospital room, and there was the same sense that nobody had ever really lived here. But it smelled nice, and Aunt Edith hadn't tried to do any praying yet.

Prayer sickened her. She didn't want to pray, or be prayed for, ever again. Which was a bitterly shameful thing to feel. Mama loved her, and here she was being ungrateful. More important, she was shutting herself off from Jesus Christ. Or had she shut herself off from Jesus Christ a year ago, and been living in Hell ever since? To escape that oppressive thought, she jumped out of bed and padded on bare feet across the cold slick hardwood floor to look out the window.

A thin winter fog lay across the hills, shrouding the bare black trees in silver vagueness. The sun was only a smudged ball sailing in the mist; it gave no warmth, and as she watched it slid behind a gray curtain. Laura had never seen a California winter before. The absence of snow added to the gloom. It was as though this were some ancient season of heatlessness from before the dawn of time out of which the crystalline winter of Illinois had been born, a bad-tempered child destined one day to be swallowed back into its eternal parent.

At the edge of the grove of trees behind the house, where the fog hung thickest, she thought for a moment that she saw four or five indistinct

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shapes, whiter blurs in the whiteness. She felt a sudden flush of self-consciousness, sure that the shapes were watching her. But when she blinked, they were gone. She shivered. She had only imagined it; there was nothing there, nobody.

"It's kind of you to let me come visit," she told Aunt Edith at breakfast. Uncle Henry had long since left for the office. Uncle Henry was in investment properties. Laura had no idea what investment properties were. She and Aunt Edith were sharing toast and coffee on the butcherblock table in the big shiny kitchen.

"I'm just pleased that you wanted to come," Aunt Edith replied. "It's been so long since we saw our little Laura. And you *are* looking well, dear. I was afraid the journey would tire you."

Laura chewed toast. She didn't look well, she knew, and the journey had nothing to do with it. But Aunt Edith seemed determined to sweep the whole thing under the rug. Some things, Laura saw, could never be swept under the rug, not really. They made lumps, lumps you stumbled over every time you turned around. But if Aunt Edith wanted to chart a course around the lumps, that was all right.

"I've been thinking," Aunt Edith went on. "I'm gone so much of the time, with my card club and various obligations, and I hate to think of you here all alone. I'm sure you'd like to meet some girls your own age. Wouldn't that be nice? There are several nice girls right here in Monte Sereno who are daughters of friends of mine."

"Please, Aunt Edith, you don't have to. I don't want to meet anybody." The toast turned to paper in Laura's mouth. She had trouble swallowing it.

"Nonsense. You can't possibly have any fun cooped up here all day. So I've arranged for you to attend a party next weekend. Now don't fuss, dear, just listen. Sally Lawrence is having a big bash next Friday night, and it just so happens that Sally's daughter Amy is right about your age. Amy is inviting some of her friends to the party, so I asked Sally straight out if you couldn't come, and of course she said they'd be delighted. So that's all settled."

The tiredness washed over Laura, turning the kitchen a wavering undersea green. "All right, Aunt Edith." Friday was too far away to argue about.

"Have you got something nice to wear? Or should we go shopping? I know some of the most darling little boutiques, and I'd love to help you pick something out."

"I can wear my wool skirt."

"I must say," Aunt Edith said, "you don't sound very enthusiastic for a girl who's going to a party."

Laura wondered why anybody *would* be enthusiastic about going to a party. There were two kinds of parties, she knew. One kind was where everybody wore nice clothes and was polite and well-behaved, and there was always a chaperon there to suggest playing games that nobody really

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wanted to play. That was the kind she and her little sisters had gone to when they were growing up. The other kind was where everybody was drinking liquor and laughing about things that weren't nice, and the boys were always putting their hands on the girls and trying to get them to dance. That was the kind they had at college. Her father had warned her about parties. The night before she left for college he sat her down in the living room and sent her sisters away and lectured her for two hours on morality. "I'm not sure but what it's a mistake," he declared, "to send you fifty miles away to a big city like Champaign-Urbana, where you'll be exposed to who knows what kind of indecent influences. But you're a big girl now, and that scholarship is a blessed opportunity for which we should be properly grateful, so we'll just have to pray to the Lord to keep you safe from temptation. I want you to promise me you'll go to church every Sunday, and not ever go to a party where they're serving liquor, and not ever let a boy come into your room. You don't know what might happen. The flesh is weak. The flesh is weak." He was gripping her shoulder so hard she was sure his fingers would leave bruises. The granite lines of his face were inches from her, and she couldn't meet his eyes, so she stared at the front of his shirt and tried not to fidget because if she fidgeted he would demand to know what impure thought she was hiding, and he would hound her until she confessed to something, anything, to escape the awful intensity of his wrath. "I'm going to write to the Dean of Girls," he said, "and ask her to look in on you and report back to me to let me know how you're doing. And I'd better not hear any stories about you keeping the wrong kind of company."

Nevertheless, it was only the third week of school when another girl at the dorm dragged her off to a party. Laura tried to resist, but she didn't try very hard. She was curious to see what kind of vice and depravity her father had been talking about, and quite sure she could resist temptation. After all, she belonged to Jesus. Jesus would watch after her, wouldn't He?

And really, the party was nearly as tame as one of her little sisters' birthday parties. It wasn't even one of those notorious fraternity parties; it was in the basement of another dorm. But when she saw them emptying a bottle of something into the punch, she put down her cup without taking another sip and went to find the Coke machine. That was how she met Stan. The Coke machine took her money and jammed, and she was standing there wondering what to do when a voice behind her said, "That thing busted again? Here, let me." He was a big pale blond boy with snowy wisps of eyebrows, a pouting mouth, and baby fat rounding out his cheeks. He was nicely dressed in dark slacks and shined shoes, but his shirt was rumpled, especially where it bulged out over his belt. She stood back gratefully, and he hauled off and hit the machine as hard as he could with the flat of his hand. Laura's ears stung; the whole room seemed to jump. He slammed into it again. Somewhere inside there was a clunk, and a can of Coke slid through the little door into the tray.

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"Thank you." Popping the top, she sipped.

"There's punch too, if you want any."

"I saw them putting something in it."

He nodded knowledgeably. "Vodka. You ever been drunk?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm a Christian."

"You are?" The boy's eyes glowed. "So am I. My name's Stan. Stan Marshall. Sometimes they call me Marshall Stan." He hitched his thumbs in his belt and swaggered.

She giggled. His face clouded. "All right, make fun of me if you want."

"Oh, no," she said hastily. "I wasn't making fun of you. I didn't mean anything. My name's Laura." His touchiness intimidated her a little, but he was a Christian, and that made it all right. They stood together in the dank cement room with the Coke machine, neither of them sure what to say next.

"Were you raised a Christian?" he asked. "I'm Born Again."

"My father is a minister. Methodist."

"Oh." He seemed faintly disappointed. "My mom was a Congregationalist, but she hardly ever went to church. It's only been six months since I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, but He's made my whole life over. I just can't stop praising His name."

"Would you like to come to church next Sunday?" Laura spoke without thinking, and then blushed furiously at her own boldness.

"Would it be all right? Could I?"

So that was how it started. You never knew what a party would lead to, which was an excellent reason for staying away from parties. Still, Aunt Edith was trying to be helpful. Laura didn't want to seem ungrateful.

Aunt Edith paused with a knifeload of jam poised above a slice of toast. "Are you feeling all right, dear? Did you hear a word I said?"

"About what?"

"About Amy Lawrence and the girls who will be there Friday."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Edith. I think I'd like to go lie down."

She went to her room and lay down, but now that she had started thinking about Stan it was hard to stop. After a minute she got up again. Aunt Edith was still in the kitchen, chattering to the telephone, or else to the maid. Laura put on a sweater and a windbreaker and went out the glass-panelled door that let directly from her bedroom onto the patio.

A silver haze lay along the land, leaching away color, leaving only browns and grays. Beyond the first low hill the second was a ghostly silhouette. The lawn was sodden with freezing dew. Laura's cheeks burned in the chill, and she zipped up the windbreaker. Except for the distant whoosh of traffic, she might have stepped back in time two thousand years. The houses in this prosperous suburb were tucked away behind tall hedges. Except for a roofline or two, the scene seemed unpeopled, remote, though in fact it would be hard to walk a hundred yards in a line without coming out by somebody's carport. Laura crossed the

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lawn light-footed and found a path among the taller wild growth, a low jungle luxuriantly green in California's paradoxical December spring.

Under the trees there was less vegetation. Low crumbling brickwork suggested that this might once have been a formal garden, but the flower beds had long since gone to ruin in dry scrub and drifts of leaves. She walked slowly, hands jammed deep in her pockets. A squirrel eyed her cautiously from around the trunk of a tree. Here and there among the fallen leaves were white-brown bursts of mushrooms. Somewhere nearby, she realized, was where she had seen, or imagined that she saw, the pale shapes in the fog, that morning from her window. There was nothing here now. She strolled deeper into the grove, turning aside when she saw the fender of a Mercedes gleaming behind a bush and heading down a gentle slope toward the sound of an invisible creek. There was no more brick underfoot now, only gravel and straggling vines.

Walking with her head down, watching her toes scuff up leaves, she nearly collided with the first statue before she saw it. She gasped and backed up, heart thudding. But the pale figure failed to leap at her, and after a moment she saw what it was and laughed. Standing before her, staring solemnly at her, was the figure of a man. He was a little more than six feet tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, dressed in a short tunic that left one shoulder and part of his chest bare. One arm was raised nearly horizontal and held out from the body, palm open in a gesture of welcome, or of demonstration, as one who says, "See; you may." From his tightly curled hair and strong clean-shaven chin to his sandalled feet, he was a dirty white, the whiteness of plaster or stone.

She stepped to one side, and the statue stayed gazing blankly at the spot where she had been. She had half-expected its eyes to follow her. Now what was it doing here? Or, to put the question another way, where had her wandering brought her to? She looked around, and her mouth fell open. The statue was not alone. The grove was peopled with silent white figures, motionless, standing here and there in no particular order. She had walked into the middle of the group without noticing. Back along the path where she had come, off to one side and facing inward toward her, stood a middle-aged woman wearing a long flowing robe, her arms open with the palms out in a posture that might have been the beginning of an embrace. On the other side of the path, near the thick bole of an oak tree, an old man with a full beard and mane of hair was leaning on a staff. The hair and beard would be white, of course, but so were the face and robe and staff.

Beyond the man she had seen first was another woman, this one younger, down on one knee, leaning forward as though to examine her reflection in a pool—though there was no pool, only leaves and dirt. Her robe, like the curly-haired man's, fell away from one shoulder, revealing a bare breast. Near her stood a boy of six or seven frozen in the act of drawing a small recurved bow. Unlike the adults, the boy was naked. Opposite these two in the clearing was a heavyset man sitting on a stone

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bench. Evidently he was an artisan, for his tools were arrayed beside him. And at the far side of the grove, half-hidden behind a bush, was a satyr playing on a set of reed pipes. The nubs of horns peeped from his brow, and when Laura tiptoed closer she saw that his legs were hairy goat's legs that ended in hooves. Since the satyr wasn't on a pedestal—none of them were—it seemed impossible that he could be balanced on two small hooves without falling over. His center of gravity wasn't even over the hooves, or so it seemed; his bunched muscles showed that he was dancing, and it was obvious that he would have to move one leg forward at any moment to catch his weight. The figures were all like that, Laura saw, not clamped in static poses but held lightly by unseen fingers in a moment of arrested motion, as though time had separated itself from them and flowed on, leaving them to wait with effortless patience for it to return and breathe life into them again. Standing in the center of the grove, turning around slowly to take it all in, she felt that she was no longer in the world she knew but in another place entirely, a place that had always existed and had no name. The fog dripped softly from the branches. Her breath steamed on the air. Somewhere a dog barked once, and was still.

When she went up to the statues, moving timidly, she saw that they had not been well cared for. There were no chipped noses or missing fingers, but the surfaces, especially the finely incised lines of detail, were dark with forest grime. The artisan had rings of evaporated rain water in the hollow of his lap, and in the angles of the child's bow were clots of spider web festooned with leaves and twigs. The satyr was especially filthy; he looked as though he had been buried and dug up. The sense that the statues might suddenly spring to life was eroded somewhat by the air of neglect and decay, and this saddened Laura. It was better not to look at them too closely. It was better to sit with her back against a tree and let her eyelids droop so the grove slurred and starred with light, and pretend that this was a magic place where nothing could ever be soiled.

"Who owns the statues?" she asked Uncle Henry that night at dinner.

"I do, I guess." He spooned onion soup into his big square face. "They were here when we bought the property. Previous owner must of picked them up in one of those antique stores in Saratoga. I keep meaning to have them appraised. Can't be worth much, not the condition they must be in. How'd you happen to stumble onto them?"

"I was out taking a walk."

"Now, dear," Aunt Edith scolded, "I do hope you bundled up and stayed close to the house. I promised your mother I'd take good care of you."

The next morning when Aunt Edith had gone off to have her hair done, Laura went looking for the maid. Victoria was in the living room, dusting. She was a tall, thin Negro girl only a year or two older than Laura, with the flawless features and carriage of a fashion model. But there was no vivacity in her. She spoke and moved with the flatness of a closed door.

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She was standing in front of the open display case that held Aunt Edith's collection of china dolls, picking up the dolls one by one, polishing each one with a flick of a rag and wiping the area where it stood before she replaced it. The dolls—mostly shepherds and shepherdesses and ballerinas and huntsmen and clowns—were far too cute, with the smug, coy, painted faces of children whose lives are devoted to convincing adults how adorably nice they are.

"Excuse me," Laura said. Victoria stopped, holding a doll—a milkmaid with a brace of pails balanced on a yoke. Both maids looked at Laura. "Could you tell me where I could find a bucket and some detergent and a scrub brush?"

"In the garage," Victoria said. Flick, flick went the rag across the doll's shoulders. "On the shelf beside the washing machine," she added.

"Thanks."

"You got somethin' you need cleaned?"

"No," Laura said—and then felt foolish, remembering how she had vomited the day she arrived. Victoria must think she was in the habit of making messes, and now was trying to clean the latest one up without letting anybody know. "It's not—it's nothing. I'll take care of it myself."

Victoria accepted this information gravely. "You change your mind, you let me know."

The sudsy water steamed in the cold morning. Today the fog had retreated a few hundred feet into the air, where it hung, a gray blanket threatening rain. The handle dug into Laura's fingers, and she had to change hands three times before she reached the grove. Now—where to start? With seven statues and only one of her, the task was formidable, but for some reason that she could not have articulated, it was vitally important. After wandering from one to another, peering into their faces and touching them lightly, lingeringly, she set the bucket down beside the boy with the bow, dug the brush out of her pocket, and went to work.

When she wiped away the first suds, his shoulder was hard and smooth and white. The surface lacked the grain of marble, and not being an expert in stone, she had no idea what it might be. It was hard enough that the bristles left no mark, that was the important thing, so she worked onward patch by patch, dipping the brush again and again into the bucket. The suds weakened and her shoulder began to throb, but she paid no attention. The rhythm of scrubbing filled her, and the pleasure of watching the shining area grow. Briefly the sun poked through the clouds and shone down golden on the boy's torso. Laura stood back to admire her work, wiped a lock of hair away from her eyes with the back of a hand, and bent to pick up the bucket. It was time for more hot water.

"Did you have a nice day, dear?" Again the dinner table, the long white cloth and asymmetrical Scandinavian candelabra.

"It was all right."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, nothing much." She wasn't about to share the statues with any-

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one, especially not Aunt Edith, who would be either uninterested or far too interested.

The next day it rained, so Laura stayed indoors, but the day after she went back to work, getting thoroughly muddy kneeling on the ground. Alone with the statues, she had started talking to them—or to herself, which was the same thing. "There, that's better," she declared when she finished an eye and a nose. "Isn't that better?" Or, scraping away the loose dirt covering a foot, "Look at that mess. It's a shame you can't take better care of yourselves. What would you have done if I hadn't come along?" The statues listened placidly, never interrupting her, never correcting her or criticizing her or telling her what to think. The silence was a balm that seeped up out of the Earth. "My mother used to spank me," she murmured, "when I didn't clean behind my ears."

The hardest part, since he was naked, was cleaning below the boy's waist. She didn't want to do it, but she could see it would look funny if she didn't. "Why couldn't they have put some clothes on you?" she asked him. She tried scrubbing with her eyes closed, but then she had to work by feel, which was even more embarrassing. She didn't think the boy's genitals looked quite right; she didn't know it was because he wasn't circumcised. She had never seen a penis until she saw Stan's, and Stan's didn't look anything like this one. The memories rose up as she scrubbed. She shuddered, and swallowed back the bitter taste in her throat. But in this place, somehow, remembering lost a little of its sting.

During those first weeks after they started going to church together, she seemed to run into Stan everywhere, in the halls outside the classrooms, in the cafeteria, in the rec room at the dorm. He was always friendly, in that nervous way she never quite got used to, laughing a little too loud and then suddenly turning apprehensive, as though afraid she was a snake about to strike him. In the evenings they went to the coffee shop together to study. Walking back to the dorm afterward, he was unfailingly polite. He never tried to hold her hand or kiss her, though sometimes he breathed hard through his nose and clenched and unclenched his fists as though he wanted to. "I really did start to think he was nice," she said to the statue.

Until the weekend in January when her roommate had gone away for the weekend and Stan, who by now had taken to dropping by whenever he felt like it, came by on Saturday night with an armload of books but instead of reading or suggesting that they go to the coffee shop paced and fidgeted and alternately babbled and turned morose in the little room for three hours until she wanted to scream at him, when suddenly he leaped at her and grabbed her and hugged her so tight she couldn't breathe and bruised her lips against her teeth kissing her. She was too bewildered to struggle, so she only stood limp, waiting to be released. But the kiss went on and on, and he began easing her backward toward the bed. She did struggle then, but her arms were feeble weightless things. They thrashed against his sides and did no good. He got her down

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on the bed on her back, still gripping her tightly. Except for a few discreet pecks on the front porch, Laura had never been kissed, but Stan's technique seemed wrong. His whole face was tensed with the effort of keeping his lips pressed together and pressed tight against hers. She rolled her face away, but his head followed, his mouth pushing against whatever part of her face he could reach. He was snorting through his nose like a steam engine. Freeing one arm from the embrace, he reached down and began tugging at her skirt, pulling the folds of cloth up around her waist to expose her underwear. Then he began tugging at his own belt.

"Stan, no, please Stan, don't, please, you mustn't, no, stop, I don't want you to, please don't, you're hurting me, let me up, Stan, don't do that, no, please, don't." Strangely, it didn't occur to her to scream. The situation was so far beyond anything she had ever envisioned that a part of her went numb. The room and the two figures on the bed were something that was happening to somebody else, very far away. She could only plead in a scared little voice and squirm as he pulled her panties down. There was more fumbling; she couldn't see what he was doing, because she had her eyes squeezed shut. The dry, tearing pain took her by surprise, and she did yell then, and Stan clamped a hand over her mouth. She opened her eyes to see his face hovering over her, brow furrowed with intensity. The burning pain deepened, but she was pinned beneath him and there was no way to get away.

It was over quickly. He made a noise in his throat, part gasp and part moan, and an unfamiliar wetness was spreading inside her. His breathing slowed. After a minute he let his hand up from her mouth. They lay together, not moving, not looking at one another. The room seemed emptier than it had been a minute before. Somewhere down the hall a stereo was blaring. Belatedly it came to her that the door wasn't locked.

Stan rolled off the bed, pulled his trousers up, fastened them. She lay on her side staring at the wall. He was the one who leaned over and pulled her skirt down to hide her shame. Say something, Stan, she pled silently. Say anything. Tell me you love me so I can scream. She could hear him moving around the room, the scrape of a chair, the thump of a book against the desk. Then the door opened and closed and she was by herself.

It hurt a lot, but she never touched herself down there if she could help it, and it didn't occur to her to examine herself to see how badly she was injured. The pain was the price you paid for sin, that was all. She wondered whether she had led Stan on, encouraged him somehow without knowing it. She wondered whether he would be ashamed and not want to see her again (which didn't seem such a bad thing), whether he would boast about it to his friends (if he had any friends), whether her life was ruined. She didn't feel ruined; she didn't feel much of anything.

The next morning as she was putting on her good shoes there was a shy, tentative tapping at the door. Not even wondering who it might be, she answered it, and Stan was standing there in his slightly rumpled

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suit, looking somewhat more ill-at-ease than usual, watching her furtively from under his feathery brows. "Are you ready for church?" he asked.

He had forced the night before back into nonexistence by an effort of will. Almost grateful for the deceit, she said, "I'll be ready in a minute."

So their relationship entered a new phase. They never spoke of it. Outwardly they went on as before, studying together, carrying their trays to the same table in the cafeteria, going to church every Sunday. He never tried to take her hand or put his arm around her. But nearly every weekend, in her room or his, he did what he had to do, and she lay still and let him. After the first time it didn't hurt quite so badly. There was always a little bleeding, but she had no reason to assume that wasn't normal. She couldn't have explained why she let him keep doing it. It was easier than resisting. If he had apologized, if he had tried to be affectionate, her anger and fear and shame might have broken through. But in the vacuum of diffidence and outward respect, there was no catalyst for resistance to crystallize around. There was only Stan, moon-faced omnipresent Stan, Stan with his nervous swings from violent activity to moody withdrawal, Stan whom she gradually, as the weeks turned to months, began to loathe and dread. He was an intrusion like a cancer, impossible to eject, and as they smiled and nodded to the people at church she wondered whether any of them might suspect, whether it would show, but nobody gave any sign. The timid girl and her large rumpled boyfriend were good Christians.

"And we were," she said to the statue of the boy, dipping the brush in the bucket to apply suds to his backside. "I was, anyway. I used to pray, 'Dear sweet Jesus, please make Stanley stop. Make him leave me alone.' Only praying didn't do any good, so then I thought it must be that the Lord wasn't listening because I was a sinner. He had cast me out of His heart. I wasn't worthy of Him. But I kept on praying anyhow. I didn't know what else to do." The statues accepted her confidences placidly.

By Friday afternoon she had finished cleaning the boy and the kneeling woman and was working on the old man with the staff when the gathering darkness forced her to stop. Trudging up the lawn with the bucket, she saw Aunt Edith standing on the patio waiting. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you. It's time to get ready for Amy's party."

Laura had forgotten about the party. Her heart sank. "Aunt Edith, I wonder if—would it be all right if I stayed home? I really don't feel like—"

"Nonsense, dear. I won't hear of it. They're *expecting* you, and I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time. Now come inside and get cleaned up."

"All right. Just let me put away the bucket."

But in spite of her aunt's assurances, she didn't have a wonderful time. There were nearly a hundred people at the party, a dozen or so Laura's age and the rest older. Laura was barely introduced to Amy Lawrence and her mother before they were whisked away to meet somebody else,

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so she sat on the couch and drank tepid pink punch and watched the Christmas lights strung around the windows blink on and off. Wherever she went, she felt, she would be this alone. The things that were important in your life were things you couldn't share with anybody, it was too painful, but compared to the important things anything else you might talk about was oppressively trivial, so you might as well say nothing.

Two women sat down next to her and started talking about pregnancies and abortions. Horrified, Laura wanted to jump up and run from the room, but she didn't want to be impolite or attract attention, so she sat quite still for several minutes and then, trying to pick up her cup from the coffee table, she knocked it over and spilled punch on the rug. Somebody ran to fetch the maid, who came with a roll of paper toweling, and Laura tried to help the maid but only succeeded in getting in the way and embarrassing herself further. When calm was restored she retreated to the gleaming yellow-tiled kitchen and sat and ate almonds and felt miserable.

"Hello."

Laura looked up. The woman was thirty or a little older. She stood with the poise of a dancer, and there was a kindly twinkle in her eye.

"Mind if I join you?"

"No. Go right ahead." Laura gestured vaguely at the vacant chairs.

"You don't look like you're in a party mood."

"I don't know anybody here. I just came to please my aunt. I'm out here visiting, and she thought I should meet some people my own age."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"You remind me of myself when I was twenty," the woman said.

"Really?" Laura had been admiring the strong planes of the woman's face, the air of confidence, the elegant earrings. That's what I'd like to be like, she was thinking.

"Really. I was convinced that I didn't have a friend in the world. A couple of very nasty things had happened to me, and I thought my life was over. Really, it was just beginning." She smiled at Laura.

Laura was curious what the nasty things were; they couldn't possibly be as nasty as her nasty things. But it wouldn't be polite to ask. Instead she said, "What do you do? I mean, do you have a job, or are you married?"

"You make it sound like an either-or question. Lots of married women work. But no, I'm not married."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" the woman said. "Don't be. I like living my own life."

"Do you work in an office?"

"I used to, but not any more. I'm a sculptor."

"A sculptor?"

"Here, I'll show you." The woman dug into her purse, which was large enough to hold a full complement of mallets and chisels, and fished up an object wrapped in soft cloth. Unwrapping it, she revealed a figurine

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about eight inches tall, carved of dark wood and polished till it glowed. "I'm doing a series of these. I just finished this one yesterday. Go ahead, you can hold it. It's all right."

Laura had reached out and then drawn her hand back. Her face burned. The figurine was carved in the likeness of a very pregnant, and very naked, woman. The features were stylized, exaggerated, but there was no doubt what they represented. Laura flushed. "It—she doesn't have any clothes on."

"So? Neither do I. Neither do you."

"What?" Laura's gaze dropped in alarm from the woman's stylish satin blouse to her own sensible wool skirt.

"Underneath our clothes, silly. We're naked all the time. They used to make these in the Stone Age, ten, fifteen thousand years ago. They made them of clay sometimes, or stone, not just wood. Probably they made them by tying dried grass together too, but those are gone now."

"What did they make them for?"

"Nobody knows, but we can guess. They might have been dolls for the children to play with. But more likely they were religious objects. This is the Great Mother—the Mother Goddess, the Earth Goddess. Some people call her the White Goddess, but obviously this one isn't white. Not that that matters. Anyway, I'm reviving a lost art form."

Laura picked the figurine up from the table and held it gingerly by the ankles and the top of the head. "It's very pretty," she said. It disturbed her, but it *was* pretty, the smooth, nearly invisible grain of the dark wood highlighting the curves of the belly and breasts and buttocks, the inscrutable heavy-lidded face, the large peasant hands, the sturdy flat feet. "You must be very talented," she went on, "to be able to make something like this."

"Oh, I don't make them. I find them."

A chill teased the back of Laura's neck. "You find them? I thought you said you carved them."

"I do. What I mean is, I find them inside the wood." The woman took the figurine back and cradled it in her palm. "It's—how can I explain it? Every piece of wood is different, because every tree is different. You can't just sit down and carve something according to a blueprint. It doesn't work that way. What you do is, you live with a piece of wood. You sit and look at it, and you keep turning it over and over, and pretty soon you start to get inside of it yourself, you kind of scrunch down in there," swaying her shoulders gently from side to side, "and after a while you start to see what shape it is inside. And from that you start to see what kind of figure is in it. It might be an animal. I don't just make Earth Goddesses.

"And when you start to see what's inside it, that's when you have to get very slow and move very lightly. If you jump—if you say, 'Ah-ha! That's what it is, it's a seal, and I know how to carve a seal, so here goes!'—if you do that, you lose it. What you get may look like a seal, but

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it won't be the seal that was in the wood to start with. That seal you won't ever be able to get back. So you have to be quiet, and wait, until that particular seal comes to you and lets you touch it and hold it and feed it and play with it. When you really know that seal, when you're already holding it in your hand, *then* you pick up your tools and carve away the part of the wood that isn't the seal. That's what I mean when I say I find them. The important things in life, you don't make them by forcing them—and most of all nobody hands them to you and tells you to put them together in such-and-such a way. You find them. If you're lucky. Or sometimes, they find you. They come to you in the night, and if you have the courage you follow them, over the hills and down the valleys," tracing the contours of the carving with a fingertip, "and you never know where they'll lead, you only know you want to go with them and stay there forever."

Laura shivered, and hugged herself. "It sounds nice," she admitted, "but it's scary. I mean, if you don't know where you're going, or what's going to happen . . ."

"Life *is* scary sometimes," the woman agreed. "Don't let anybody tell you it isn't. And don't let anybody tell you how to live it, either. You know, everybody has their own ideas on how you ought to live your life. They'll tell you they know what's best for you, and they'll keep after you to try to make you believe them. When times are good, it's easy enough to do what you're told. But when things get scary, there's only one thing you can afford to listen to. You have to listen to your heart. Your heart knows what's right for you. The trouble is, sometimes your heart doesn't talk very loud, and everybody else is shouting at you, and you get confused. The thing to do when you get confused about what to do is get real quiet and just listen until you hear your heart."

"But what if your heart is mistaken?" Laura said. "What if your heart wants things that are wicked?"

"Words like 'wicked' are words other people use to try to run your life for you. They're not heart words." The woman held the figurine out to Laura. "Would you like to have this? It's yours, if you want it."

"Oh, I couldn't. It must be worth loads of money. I couldn't possibly afford—"

"Did I say anything about money?"

"I can't, honestly. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Anyway, I don't know what Aunt Edith would say. I mean, because it's naked. She wouldn't think it was nice."

"Well, are you going to listen to your heart, or are you going to listen to your aunt?" The woman lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't want to pressure you into anything. I'll tell you what. I'll keep it for you. It's yours, and it'll be there if you change your mind. When you decide you'd like to have it, let me know. Okay?"

"All right. I guess. Yes. Thank you."

The woman swaddled the figurine again in its cloth and tucked it back

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into her bag. She stood up. "One more thing," she said. "Smile a little bit. It's good for your face muscles."

Laura managed a wan smile.

The things the woman had said spun in her brain. She didn't understand them, exactly, but they left a feeling like wind blowing through an open window. It was only later, when she was back home undressing for bed, that she realized she hadn't found out the woman's name. She might never be able to claim the figurine.

During the next few days Laura finished washing the old man and the standing woman and started to work on the artisan. The peacefulness of the grove drew her back again and again. It was a palpable quality, quite different from the peacefulness of Aunt Edith's house, which was merely silent and empty. Laura always brought her bucket and scrub brush, but sometimes instead of working she simply sat, on a fallen log or on the cold damp ground, watching the play of light across the statues' faces.

Beneath the peacefulness, however, or along the edges of it, was something faintly disturbing, an elusive something that slid away from her when she tried to think about it, the way smoke slides between fingers. But gradually she figured out what the source of the disturbance must be. It had to do with the poses and positions of the statues. At first she assumed she was only imagining things, but day by day this idea became harder to maintain. What she found, comparing mental notes with herself about yesterday and the day before, was that the statues were moving.

Not, she hastened to assure herself, actually *moving*—no matter how long she sat staring, they remained perfectly motionless. But between one day and the next there were small changes, like grains of sand shifting as a dune crawls inland from the sea. She hadn't consciously noted anything at first, only felt that the grove was somehow mysteriously different every time she came into it, even though outwardly it was the same as before. But as she grew quieter and more watchful, she began to notice the changes, not as they occurred but having occurred. The standing man's outstretched arm was at a different angle today than yesterday. She walked around him very slowly, measuring the angle with her eyes. The change was so small it was hard to be sure. Still, it *felt* as though the arm had moved. A chill that had nothing to do with the winter air prickled her shoulders. Statues didn't move—that was impossible.

But it wasn't just the arm. It was the spot on the ground that the kneeling woman was looking at, which sometimes shifted as much as six inches, as well as Laura could judge by the pattern in the roots and pebbles. One morning the woman was staring directly at a single blue wildflower, which had sprung up overnight in defiance of the season. But the next morning she was staring at bare dirt, and Laura looked everywhere for the flower without finding it. The satyr, too. On some days, sitting on the log, she could see him clearly from the waist up where he

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stood behind the occulting moon of a fat bush. On other days he was entirely hidden but for his face, the sensual curves of lips, cheeks, eyebrows teasing her bodilessly. And the old man with the staff. When she had first seen him, he had been looking out of the grove at a distant hill. But during the following days his body turned slowly so that he was looking into the grove, nearly toward where Laura sat.

She puzzled all this out bit by bit, not really believing any of it. Somebody must be sneaking into the grove at night and moving the statues. But why? To make her believe she was going crazy? Neither Aunt Edith nor Uncle Henry would do any such thing, they had no reason to. And certainly it couldn't be the maid. In the end, the very peacefulness of the grove drew the blood from the hypothesis. Nobody ever came here but Laura. Slowly she let herself begin to suspect that the statues might indeed be moving.

"But they only move at night," she said to herself. "If I want to catch them at it, I've got to stay all night and watch." Aunt Edith would never approve, of course. Which was an excellent reason for not telling her. The best thing would be to slip out the outside door of the bedroom onto the patio, and go back in the same way at dawn.

She fortified herself with a Thermos of hot coffee, which she made stealthily in the kitchen after Victoria had finished the dishes and Uncle Henry had vanished into his study and Aunt Edith had left for a canasta game. Laura put a sweater on under her coat and added a second pair of socks. California winters might be mild compared to Illinois winters, but that didn't mean you couldn't catch cold.

It would be safer to wait for everybody to go to bed. If Aunt Edith looked in on her, there would be trouble. But if she waited too long, whatever happened in the grove might already have happened by the time she got there. So she wrote two notes. The one in the kitchen read, "Aunt Edith—I'm tired and I've gone to bed early. Please don't wake me when you come in." The one pinned to her pillow read, "Aunt Edith—I couldn't sleep, so I went out for a walk. Please don't worry. I'll be back soon." These preparations completed, she slipped out the door onto the patio.

The sky had been scoured by an arctic breeze, and the stars glinted like flecks of glass in the blackness. In the East a nearly full moon hung, blotchy and lopsided. It watched over Laura's shoulder as she walked down the lawn, so that her shadow walked beside her.

Under the trees it was so dark she nearly lost her way. She stumbled over rocks and roots, and once a bush scratched at her face. But in the grove the statues seem to glimmer faintly with their own light. She chose a spot off at one side, where she could see all of them without turning her head too far, and sat down to wait. There was no wind, and the muffled mutter of distant traffic had thinned. Except for the occasional rustle of a small animal along the ground, the night was silent.

Laura's gaze shifted from one pale shape to another, seeking to capture

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the first flicker of animation. But the light was so poor that after a few minutes her eyes rebelled. The whole grove seemed to melt and flow like wax. She rubbed her eyes, and the scene settled down briefly, but before long it was bathed again in milky haze. Annoyed at her own frailty, she poured a cup of coffee. The sting of heat on her lips and the rich aroma restored her. Eyestrain was a problem she hadn't counted on. She wished she had thought to bring a flashlight, but she couldn't very well go back to the house for one now, especially since she didn't know where it was kept. There was nothing to do but close her eyes occasionally to rest them, and hope that the false impressions of movement wouldn't mask the real movement when (if) it came.

The wait became a head-spinning struggle. In spite of the coffee, Laura kept nodding off. Dream images of satyrs dancing, of naked boy archers flying through the sky, of pale, noble men and women strolling among the trees, surged up, but when she jerked awake the grove was just as it had been before. She heard voices too, murmurings out of which strange fragments leaped: an old man saying, "She must rest now," a woman saying, "She could be beautiful," a child, "Come on! Come fly!" It felt so good to lie down; she could see nearly as well lying down. All she had to do was keep her eyes open. Before long she was fast asleep.

She woke to gray dawn, feeling not cold and stiff but curiously warm and refreshed. She lay, head on her curled arm, examining in detail the mysterious knots and turnings in a fallen twig close by her face. With only a little more effort, it seemed, she would understand what mysterious forces had shaped its growth. Confused scraps of the night's dreams came back to her. None of it made sense, really, any more than dreams usually did, but certainly it *had* all been dreams. She hadn't actually seen the statues move. The experiment was a failure.

But when she moved to sit up, she discovered that she was blanketed by a mound of fallen leaves. They poured away from her in a dozen small avalanches, and the dust made her sneeze. She ran a hand through them, puzzled. How had they gotten there? She hadn't buried herself; somebody had come along and covered her during the night. The leaves on the forest floor were damp and mouldering, but those she had been covered with were dry and whole, as though they had been selected by hand. Fear gripped her, and she scrambled to her feet and looked around wildly. Invisible forces were awake here, forces that came to life when nobody was watching. Somehow the fact that the forces were hiding from her made them more sinister than if she had been able to see them clearly. The mound of leaves frightened her precisely because there was no way she could confront whoever had done it. Grabbing the Thermos, she set off at a trot toward the house, looking over her shoulder again and again, unable to shake the feeling that something was following her. When the statues were out of sight the woods seemed to close in even more, and she ran faster, gasping for breath.

The bedroom door opened on silent hinges. She stepped inside, locked

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it, and leaned against it while her heart slowed. Of course there must be a rational explanation for how the leaves had come to be there. The wind. A passing stranger. Squirrels and raccoons. Not the statues. No, please, not the statues. Because if the statues had done it, she saw suddenly, then they weren't statues at all. And if they weren't statues, *what were they?* What had she awakened, and what did it mean to do to her? Or could this be her imagination—could she be having a breakdown? Why had she been so foolish? If the statues were moving, that was their business. She didn't want to know about it.

The clock on the dresser said 7:20. Time to get the Thermos back to the kitchen, if she hurried. Then she could get in bed and "wake up" when Aunt Edith called her. She wanted very much not to have to explain where she had spent the night. She was too confused.

She unscrewed the top and tipped the Thermos into the sink, expecting cold coffee. But the liquid that ran out was thick and golden. She righted the Thermos with a jerk and stared into the mute silvery circle of its mouth. The aroma wasn't coffee, either. It was fragrant with spice. She had a panicky urge to pour the rest down the drain, but curiosity stopped her. She poured a little into the cap, sniffed again, and very slowly brought it to her mouth to touch the liquid with the tip of her tongue.

The flavor blossomed like a flower unfolding. There were apples, and honey, and cinnamon, and something else—blackberry? Mint? She put out her tongue again, but stopped rigid when she realized what she was doing. Whoever had piled the leaves had filled her Thermos with this stuff, hoping she would drink it. Why? What would it do to her? She upended both cap and Thermos over the sink, turned the tap on full, and rinsed them savagely. Wiping with a dish towel, she suppressed a pang of regret. Everybody knew you mustn't eat or drink anything you found in the woods. The flavor of the drop she had drunk still tickled her tongue, so she rinsed her mouth with clean water. Going back to her room, she felt much more tired than when she awoke.

It was closing on Christmas, and during the next few days Aunt Edith, her conscience presumably stung by her earlier neglect, found a great many things that Laura simply had to help with. Presents and wrapping paper had to be bought, and since nothing was ever quite what Aunt Edith was looking for Laura was dragged from shop to shop like a duck on a string behind a three-year-old. Then there were cookies and candy to be made and packed in baskets with bows on top for a long list of people, all of whose likes and dislikes Aunt Edith had catalogued in detail. Laura had no chance to go back to the grove.

She was grateful; her earlier fascination with the statues had turned to terror. But as she avoided going back to see them standing reassuringly motionless, her fright fed on her imaginings and grew huge. At night she lay awake for fear they would come to plague her dreams. She knotted the blankets tossing, and woke drenched in sweat. In one dream she had been in a huge schoolroom with hundreds of other students at tiny desks.

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The old man with the staff was lecturing at the front, but Laura found she couldn't understand anything he said, and the words on the blackboard writhed, alien and incomprehensible. Then without transition she was following him along a narrow mountain ledge on a night full of wind and rain, and he was far ahead carrying a lantern. As she watched he vanished around a corner, leaving her alone in the dark. She ran after him stumbling and scraping her knees and crawling on and finally slipping off the edge and falling and falling and falling forever. That was bad enough, but the dreams of the satyr were worse. She was on a farm she had visited once, watching them feed the pigs, and the satyr crawled up out of the mud at the bottom of the pig pen, covered from head to toe with slime, and clambered over the fence toward her, leering and slavering, his long red tongue licking out obscenely.

In spite of her revulsion, she saw that there was something familiar about the satyr's face. She was sure she had known somebody who looked like him. If only she could remember, she frowned at the chocolate chip cookies, maybe the face would lose some of its terrible power.

Somewhere between the coconut clusters and the candy canes, she remembered. She had been at the coffee shop with Stan; he was hunched over a chemistry textbook, chewing his pencil, and she was trying without much success to memorize irregular French verbs. The air was greasy with the smell of burgers. At the next table a discussion was in progress, one of those terribly earnest debates that only undergraduates seem to have, because everybody else is either too cynical or too over-specialized. The young man holding forth was taller and thinner than the satyr, and he didn't have horns—at least none that were visible—but his black beard was trimmed the same way, and his eyes snapped. What caught her attention was when he declared, "Christianity stinks. It's not just worthless, it's actively bad for you. Don't mess with it."

Laura's heart lurched. How dare he speak that way!

"Oh, come on," another boy objected. "Who are you to say that? You're talking about one of the world's great religions."

"Religion has nothing to do with it," the satyr replied. "Christianity hasn't been a religion since 300 A.D. It's a Fascist political and social organization whose primary purpose is to keep people scared so they'll obey orders."

Stan slammed his chemistry book shut. "Come on," he said to Laura. "We're getting out of here." He avoided looking at the next table, but his face was blotched an ugly red. Laura gathered her papers, fumbling at them clumsily because she was busy listening. What she was hearing horrified her, but almost against her will she wanted to hear more.

"What about the teachings of Christ, hunh?" the second boy persisted. "How can you say that isn't a religion?"

"Sugar coating. You know as well as I do that Christians only follow the teachings of Christ when it suits them. But I'm not complaining about hypocrisy. That isn't a Christian failing, it's a human failing. The

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reason Christianity isn't a religion is that it doesn't do what a religion is supposed to do. It doesn't enrich people's lives; it tramples on them."

Stan was tapping his foot impatiently. Laura got her arms into her coat, scooped up her homework, and followed as he wove a route among the tables. She wanted to hear the rest of this scandalous conversation, but not badly enough to defy Stan. That night, lying in bed, she tried to imagine what the boy's objections to Christianity might be—not, she assured herself, because of any merit they might have, but so she could exercise her faith by refuting them. But she found that she was staring at a wall.

The second time she saw the undergraduate satyr was a month or so later. Needing desperately to get away from her room before Stan dropped by, she accepted an invitation from one of the girls to go to an off-campus party. Going up the narrow, well-worn stairs to the apartment, hearing the music thundering down, she felt a brief tingle of excitement. The apartment was a dim grotto under red and blue bulbs, and there was no furniture except pillows on the floor and beaded curtains in the doorways. But she knew nobody, so she stood against a wall, getting a headache and wondering whether she should leave. The satyr, clad in a sheepskin vest, materialized in front of her and held out a stubby, lumpy cigaret that was smoldering unevenly and smelled sweetly unlike tobacco. "Want a toke?" he asked.

"Is that—" she said. "I don't know what to do."

"Just suck it into your lungs and hold it there."

Gingerly she took the cigaret from him, trying not to touch his fingers with hers. The smoke raked her throat, but she held her breath as long as she could, until the tickle made her cough. The boy had already disappeared back into the crowd, taking the joint with him. Belatedly she remembered the conversation in the coffee shop, and wondered whether she should search for him to ask what he had meant. But she didn't see him anywhere, and anyway it wasn't important. The marijuana had no effect on her that she could see; when being alone got too depressing, she went back to the dorm. She never saw the bearded boy again.

"Oh, there you are." Laura was in the living room, wearing her candy-making apron, staring at the china dolls in their glass case. Their droll little painted faces made her queasy, but at least they were a distraction from dreams and memories. She had been trying to fathom why anybody would keep such trinkets. "I've been looking all over for you," Aunt Edith went on. "I do hope I haven't been working you too hard. You were beginning to perk up, but for the last few days you haven't been the same. If there's anything bothering you, all you have to do is let me know."

"I'm all right," Laura said. "I was just looking at these."

"Do you like them?" Aunt Edith said gaily. "I think they're so lovely. I'm always pleased when I find a new one. They're quite valuable, too.

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You'd be surprised." Her eyes lit up. "I know—would you like to take a couple of them to keep in your room? To cheer you up?"

"Oh, no, that's all right. I wouldn't want—"

"Nonsense, it's perfectly all right. I know you'll be careful with them. Here, let me see. This one, I think, and this one. Yes, that's perfect. Aren't they precious?" She held them out for Laura to admire.

Laura's hands hung at her sides. "They're very nice," she said colorlessly.

"Well, come on, let's go see how they look on your dresser." Aunt Edith led the way, and Laura, a knot pinching her throat, followed. After Aunt Edith had found the perfect spot on the dresser for the little figures, chirped happily, and departed, Laura sat on the bed staring at them, wondering what to do. A plump boy in short pants and a pink-cheeked girl twirling a parasol. They were loathsome. They were obnoxious. She considered sneaking them back into the case in the living room, but Aunt Edith would notice, and she would have to try to explain. In the end she left them where they were.

That evening Uncle Henry arrived home with the tree, a magnificent specimen whose tip reached within inches of the living room's ten-foot ceiling. The next afternoon Aunt Edith enlisted Laura and Victoria to help bring the ornaments in from the garage. Victoria, being the maid, was allotted the more hazardous task of standing on a stepladder and handing boxes down, while Laura and Aunt Edith ferried them into the house. Laura set the first box down on the couch in the living room, but Aunt Edith said, "No, dear, let's put them in Henry's study, where they'll be out of the way, and bring the ornaments in from there."

"It seems like a lot of extra work," Laura said.

"But the clutter is so distracting," her aunt explained. "I can't think properly about where to hang things when I'm surrounded by clutter."

Laura had only glanced into the study before. It was decorated in a self-consciously male style, with dark wood panelling, a deer's head mounted over the fireplace, bookcases copiously stocked with leather-bound, gold-embossed volumes, and, standing in one corner, a genuine head-to-toe suit of armor, complete with louvred visor and spikes at the elbows. Though it was thoroughly polished, ineradicable spots of tarnish left little doubt about its age. It reminded Laura of her father. He was as stern-looking as that, and he might be as hollow, because if there was anything inside you could never touch it. He had never complimented her that she could recall, seldom even smiled. It didn't matter what she did; if it was good it wasn't good enough, and if it was bad she was punished. To her father, raising children was a problem in engineering. You applied the necessary leverage to keep them from leaning in the wrong direction. If they persisted, you increased the pressure. Setting the boxes down one by one at the foot of the suit of armor, she found herself whispering, "Yes, Daddy. Yes, Daddy." It was crucial that the boxes be set in a neat array, and not too close to the feet. When she came

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back from the garage and found that Aunt Edith had put a box in the wrong place, she hurried to set it right. Good girls keep their rooms neat, and never speak unless spoken to. Yes, Daddy.

Of course, her care went for nothing, because when they started unpacking there was tissue paper around the armor's feet like a snowdrift. Laura rushed back and forth carrying strings of lights and delicate glass balls and angels flocked with flecks of silver. Holding an ornament, she would search for just the right spot on the tree, but when she had hung it Aunt Edith, who was standing halfway across the room observing the esthetic effect, would shake her head and say, "Oh, dear. Oh, no, that's not quite right, is it?", and come and snatch the ornament off and hang it somewhere else. Eventually Laura wearied of this routine and brought an ornament directly to Aunt Edith. Aunt Edith said, "No, dear, you go ahead and hang it. I don't want to have all the fun."

Laura was used to stringing popcorn and cranberries with her mother and sisters for a smaller, scruffier tree. She wondered how they were. She hoped they were all right. She supposed she ought to phone them, but her father might answer—and anyway, what could she say that wouldn't embarrass them all?

The last box held the figures for the manger scene. At first she wasn't sure what they were. They were crudely and amateurishly carved of wood, and gaudily painted in thick reds and greens and blues. Several of them actually seemed misshapen. But yes, here were the three wise men, who had always been Laura's favorites, and here was a cow—or was it a donkey? "Aren't they quaint," Aunt Edith said, leaning over her. "We got them on vacation in Acapulco. Genuine hand-crafted artifacts. The natives down there aren't so sophisticated as we are, but they're quite devout. I feel sure these have a real spiritual aura. Don't you agree?"

"I've never seen anything like them," Laura said truthfully. She unwrapped the objects one by one. This one was a shepherd with his staff, so these had to be sheep, even though they looked like pigs. Here was Joseph, or at any rate somebody with a beard. This must be Mary. And here was the matchbox manger. Now where was the Baby Jesus? The carton was still half full of crinkled tissue, evidently padding, although the figures certainly didn't look fragile. Laura pawed through it looking for the Baby, at first in annoyance and then with mounting panic. She was sitting on the floor surrounded by empty boxes and piles of loose tissue, with the suit of armor watching sternly over her, and she couldn't find the Baby Jesus anywhere. She started rooting among the paper, throwing it in the air. Where was He? The empty manger stared up at her accusingly. Still tossing paper, she began to whimper. How could the Baby be gone? How could a thing like that happen? Somebody must have done something. They must have hidden it. She looked up at the armor. "You saw," she said. "You were looking. What happened? What happened?" The visor remained closed. "I keep losing babies," she said. Some-

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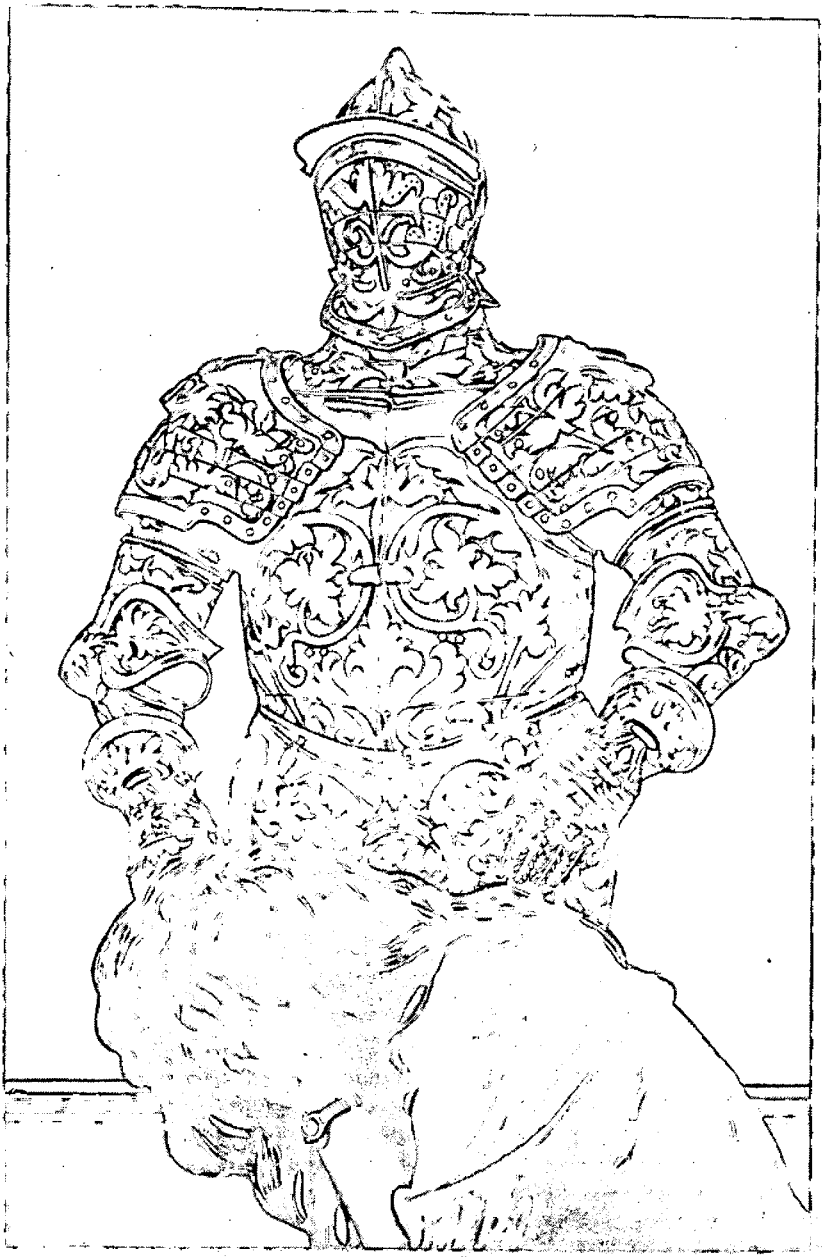

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where inside her a giggle started. She tried to hold it down, but it came bubbling to the surface. "I keep losing the damn baby," she repeated, gasping.

It was spring when she first began to suspect, spring with its obscene profusion of flowers, butterflies, and couples shamelessly nuzzling by the bike racks. She said nothing to anybody. Who would she tell? Anyway, her period had always been irregular. Any day now it would come, and she could relax. Mid-terms were looming, too, and she had more important things like French and history to worry about. So a month went by, and then another. By now she was sure. When anybody looked at her her face burned, and her leg muscles twitched when she walked. She was on a tightrope. She was certain that everybody could see the soft swelling beginning. Her roommate did notice how ill she was in the mornings, dragging herself out of bed and down the hall to the bathroom, and, eyes narrowed shrewdly, finally did ask, "Hey, you aren't pregnant, are you?" Laura pressed her lips together and shook her head savagely. "Because if you are, a friend of mine said she knows this doctor, I could find out—"

"No! There's nothing the matter. I'm fine."

"Suit yourself." The girl shrugged and turned away.

An impulse stirred in her to tell Stan, one night when they were sitting in the coffee shop and he was droning on about the chain of shoe stores he was going to open someday, a wicked impulse to see how his mouth would fall open, how his upper lip would start to perspire. But she couldn't do it. She was terrified that he would abandon her and leave her to raise the baby by herself, and even more terrified that he would insist on doing the right thing and marrying her. The prospect of being subjected to Stan's attentions every night was more than she could face. But at the same time, she needed somebody to cling to, and however unpleasant he might be, Stan was indubitably *there*. So she pretended everything was as usual, and said nothing. The weeks ticked by. At night, shivering in bed, she prayed as fervently as she knew how that this be only a delayed period, but her prayer went unanswered.

Somehow (afterward it was only a blur) she made it through finals, chewing her fingers bloody, drinking endless Cokes and eating a mountain of potato chips. She was constantly sick to her stomach, and her head wouldn't stop aching. When her parents arrived, she had barely started to pack. Her father scowled at the disorder and went to sit in the car while her mother bustled around helping. On the way home they wanted her to sit between them, but she crawled into the back seat and made herself small in a corner and pretended to take a nap, which turned into a real nap, which left her feeling not rested but muzzy and confused.

She knew she would have to tell them, but the right moment never seemed to arrive. Sitting at the kitchen table drinking a glass of milk while her mother stood at the stove, she drew in a breath and opened her mouth and the phone rang. Or the neighbors were due over any minute. Or Tracy or Ann was underfoot. Or her mother was too busy

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talking to listen, going on about gardening and the church fair and what a good girl Laura was, how proud they were of her, how they knew she could never disappoint them. And what could you say after that?

"Mama?"

"Yes, dear?" It was after supper. They were alone in the living room. Her mother was knitting.

"Mama, I've got to talk to you."

"Yes, dear. What is it?"

"Mama, I'm—" Pregnant. But she couldn't shape the word with her lips. "I'm—" She swallowed with a great effort and sat dumb, her fists clenched.

"You're a wonderful girl, Laura," her mother said, trying to be helpful. "Your father and I have always been very proud of you."

Laura shut her eyes. "Baby," she said. "Baby."

"Why, no, dear, you're not a baby. You're practically grown up."

"I'm—going—to—have—a—*baby*." Her eyes flooded.

The knitting needles stopped. Laura sat looking at the rug. In the silence the refrigerator kicked on.

"What did you say?"

"A baby. I'm going to have."

"I—I don't understand. You're not married. Are you?"

Laura shook her head.

"Who's the boy? Is he going to marry you? Do we know him?"

"No, he's—a boy at school. I couldn't stop him."

"How often did this happen? More than once?"

She swallowed again. "Maybe ten or twenty times."

Her mother took in a sharp breath and let it out. "How could you?" she asked. "How could you?"

"I don't know," Laura sobbed. "It just happened. After the first time it didn't seem to matter so much."

"Nothing 'just happens,' " her mother said. "If you're weak, you may be tempted, but the Lord always gives you the strength to resist. When you persist in evil, it's no good trying to excuse yourself by saying it 'just happened.' " She set her knitting on the lamp table. "Your father will have to be told. I think you'd better tell him yourself."

"Couldn't you tell him? Please? I don't—"

"Laura. You know the rule."

Of course. When she was little and she broke the cookie jar, Mama made her sweep up the mess and then made her march into her father's study and tell him what she had done. Her father made her go get the belt. The next Sunday he preached a sermon on obedience. She was startled now to see how old he looked, sitting stiffly in the stuffy little room. A vein stood out blue on his temple. She entered on leaden feet and stopped just inside the door.

"Go on," her mother said, and when she hesitated said again, "Go on."

"Daddy, I'm—I'm in some trouble."

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His eyes flashed like a hawk's eyes when it sees a rodent. "What kind of trouble?"

"I'm—I know you don't—I just—oh, please! Please!" She fell to her knees in front of his chair and buried her face in the cool plastic chair arm and groped for his hand, but he had withdrawn it. "It was horrible, and it was a sin, and I'm sorry! Please, please say you forgive me! I didn't mean it, it'll never happen again, never, only please tell me it's all right, I didn't mean to but he made me, and afterwards I couldn't stop it, and now I'm going to have a b-b-baby!"

"Stand up, young lady." His voice was a lash with barbs in it. "Stand up this instant. You may have no respect for yourself, but you shall show some respect for your elders. Stand up straight, and stop blubbering, and explain the meaning of this outburst."

She managed to get to her feet, and snuffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "It was a boy I met at school. I didn't want to do it, but he made me. I didn't know how to stop him. I prayed, Daddy, please believe me—"

"She says she did it twenty or thirty times," her mother interjected.

"Is this true?"

"I was afraid to tell him no. I was afraid of what he'd do. I didn't want to let him, but he kept coming around—"

"Slut," her father said. "Whore. You make me ashamed to be a father. Engaging in indecent, lascivious acts and then blaming the boy for it. The Devil has had an easy time with you, that's plain to see. Lust and fornication, and now lying to your parents."

"I'm not lying!" Laura wailed. "I tried to stop him, but he was too strong! He made me—"

"Liar. Filthy. Did he make you take drugs, too? Answer me!"

"I—I smoked some marijuana. Just once."

Her father's face was twitching with rage. "I believe I've heard enough. I had hoped, when we sent you away to school, that you had learned to be a responsible Christian girl. Plainly I was wrong. Go and get the belt."

"Daddy, please! I didn't—"

"The belt. Now. You know the rule. Every second you delay means an additional stroke. One. Two. Three. Four."

"Daddy, please, you can't mean it! How can you possibly—"

"Seven. Eight. Nine."

Her eyes were streaming. She looked to her mother for support, but her mother only stared grimly at the wall and said nothing. Laura wheeled and sprinted from the room—but not toward her parents' bedroom, where the belt was hanging in the closet. She raced to the bathroom, slammed the door, and locked herself in. Her hands were shaking so badly she barely got the lock fastened before her father was rattling and pounding and shouting, "Laura! Come out of there! Come out this instant! You know that won't do you any good. You cannot escape punishment, and I will brook no disobedience! Do you hear me?" Laura

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cowered back against the wash basin, trembling. After a moment she heard her mother's voice: "Here, I've got the key." She lunged forward and threw her weight against the door, but it swung open anyway, forcing her back. Her father grappled with her, trying to seize her wrists, and she writhed sideways and slipped on the bath mat and fell and he fell on top of her knocking the breath out of her and she grabbed the side of the tub to try to stand up and he grabbed her from behind and she fell again and struck the edge of the tub hard across her abdomen and he hauled her to her feet and she lurched into him so he bumped against something and they both fell down again and he pinned her arms and her mother was holding out the belt and her father was forcing her across the floor so she was kneeling in front of the toilet, and he said, "Now, now you'll learn, now I'll teach you," and he was pulling her skirt up and pulling her underwear down and suddenly she barely felt the sting of the belt a cramp started inside her and grew and grew till she was screaming gasping and he was still whipping her thinking she was screaming because of the belt he was yelling telling her to say she was a filthy whore say it or he'd keep on till she said it only the cramp was so bad she couldn't say anything she was being torn in half all she could do was scream and feel the sweat pouring out on her face and smell the disinfectant smell of the toilet the cramp had hold of her belly it was crushing her squeezing burning and then there was wetness between her legs and she was shuddering in spasms and her mother was yelling, "Stop, you're hurting her, can't you see you're hurting her," and her father was grunting, "She's hurting herself, I'm only doing the Lord's will," and the wetness was running down her leg and the cramp was squeezing again and the belt had stopped falling she was shivering and she could hear her father breathing hard and her mother said, "My God in Heaven, look what you've done," and the wetness was pooling on the floor around her knees the cramp was a fist and when at last she twisted sideways on the toilet and looked down she already knew what it was, the blood all streaked milky yellow and the transparent pink thing no bigger than her thumb the tiny dark veins like hairs lying there curled in its jelly sac floating in the mess on the floor. She still hurt—there was a lump of hot metal swelling inside her. But in a kind of weird underwater clarity she saw that somebody had slammed into the medicine cabinet during the struggle, because there were aspirin scattered on the floor and an open packet of her father's single-edge razor blades. Rolling off the toilet, she was hit by a cramp that brought fresh tears to her eyes, but through the tears a loose razor blade swam up and she grabbed it and hid it in her palm and levered herself to her feet and stood bent over tugging at her panties. Her mother was in the hall outside the door, face averted. Her father stood in the doorway, still holding the belt, the rage in his eyes smoldering. "The Lord's judgment—" he began.

Laura swung the razor at him. The first slash cut diagonally from his shoulder down across his chest, shearing the fabric open. He looked down

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at it stupidly, and she swung again, at his face, drawing a line from cheekbone to chin that spread wide like a dark flower opening. The third cut went down his arm, and she felt resistance as the blade sank into cloth and muscle. He made a noise in his throat and jumped or toppled backward out the door. She slammed it and locked it again. Then, suddenly dizzy, she slid down the door until she was sitting on the floor. The little cabinet under the sink was standing open, and she could see a blue-and-white plastic jug of Clorox bleach. After staring at it for a minute—it was very far away—she crawled toward it, ignoring the sticky mess her knees slid in, and unscrewed the cap and tipped the bottle up and drank.

"Are you all right, dear?" Aunt Edith asked.

Laura looked up from the mound of tissue and empty boxes. "What?"

"I asked if you were all right. You seemed awfully quiet."

"I'm okay. I was just—I lost the baby. The Baby Jesus."

"Oh, is that all? Well, He's got to be here somewhere, doesn't He? Yes, here He is."

Aunt Edith bent and retrieved the tiny carved figure and held it out in her palm. It was no larger than her thumb, and the bulbous forehead, tucked-in chin, and black dots for eyes rang the horrid bell of memory. She pushed Aunt Edith's hand away. "Take it away," she said. "Get it out of here. I don't want to see it."

After a moment of shocked silence, Aunt Edith said, "Very well, dear. Perhaps you'd better go lie down. You'll feel better when you've taken a nap."

Laura got to her feet and waded through the strewn wrappings to the door. But she wasn't sleepy, and she couldn't relax in her room because of the two repellant little china dolls on the dresser, whose grotesque innocence was a mocking accusation. She picked up a hairbrush, intending to smash them—but she was a guest here. Instead she jerked her arms into her coat and went out the door onto the patio. The fog had come in again. The day was gray and silver and wet and cold.

Down at the edge of the lawn, under a tree, stood the old man with the staff, and beside him the older woman with her arms open.

Laura gasped. Her heart hammered wildly. They were still white, and still motionless. They were still statues. But they had come up from the grove somehow, and they were standing looking directly at her. With a little cry, she turned and stumbled back into the bedroom and locked the door.

When she peeked out the window a moment later, the statues were gone.

She blinked, and rubbed her eyes. Had it been a hallucination? No, they had been there. They had come up to the edge of the lawn specifically for her benefit. They had come for her. She whimpered and tugged at her hair. What was happening to her? And why?

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After that there was no question of going back to the grove. She stayed in the house, watching television, playing solitaire, trying to read and losing interest. At night when she went to her room she turned off the light and, after bracing herself, looked out at the yard. It would be worse not to look, because then she would imagine things: Always, when she looked, there was a statue or two standing just under the shelter of the trees, watching, waiting for her. Sometimes it was the old man. Sometimes it was the young man, or one of the women, or the child with the bow. "Go away," she would whisper, her words fogging the glass. "Leave me alone." They gave no sign that they had heard. And in the morning they were always gone.

Christmas came. Aunt Edith gave her a fluffy pink sweater. Uncle Henry gave her a Japanese doll in a display case, with lacquered hair and a red kimono embroidered with gold thread. Using money provided by Aunt Edith, Laura bought Uncle Henry a bathrobe and Aunt Edith a cut glass serving dish. On Christmas morning her mother called from Illinois, and after Aunt Edith had chatted for twenty minutes she came and hunted up Laura, who was hiding in one of the other guest bedrooms pretending to be absorbed in a magazine.

She picked up the receiver and held it to her ear, but for a minute she didn't say anything. The line hissed and crackled in a slow rising and falling rhythm, like something old and huge and feeble lying in its cave up by the North Pole and breathing on the world.

"Hello, Mama."

"Laura, is that you?" A pause. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mama."

"I hope you're all right. I hope you're feeling better."

"I'm fine. How's Ann? How's Tracy? Are they all right?"

"They're fine, dear. So is your father. He sends his—he said to tell you—well, he's worried about you. He's concerned. We all are."

"I don't think I want to talk any more, Mama. Goodbye." No, he hadn't sent his love. He probably hadn't said to tell her anything at all. He just sat there in his chair—she imagined it, not having been home since that night—brooding, his face ashen around the fresh scar.

"Laura," her mother said quickly, "we miss you, honey. When are you going to come home?"

"I don't know." She handed the receiver back to Aunt Edith.

Wandering back to her room, she asked herself, "When *am* I going to go home?" She couldn't impose on Aunt Edith forever. But she couldn't go home either, not and face her father.

Also, as long as she stayed in California she had to contend with the menacing presence of the statues. Every night they came a little closer to the house, standing plainly visible on the lawn, holding their silent vigil, vanishing back into the woods before dawn. Nobody else ever saw them—or if they did, they said nothing, and Laura was afraid to ask. She knew they would think she was crazy. All the same, she wasn't

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imagining things. Aunt Edith and Uncle Henry's bedroom was on the other side of the house, that was all.

And the statues went on invading her dreams. She dreamed she was walking in the grove when it was dappled with summer sun, her hand in the old man's as he strode along marking the path with his staff. He led her on past the familiar clearing, down a slope she had never noticed before, and now the boy with the bow was holding her other hand and skipping beside them. They came out from under the trees into a valley that sparkled green and gold. People in strange robes standing in the fields waved at them. Laura waved back, feeling that she had known them for a long time. Solemnly the old man presented her with a sturdy wooden goblet, and when she lifted it to drink she saw it was the same golden nectar that had been in the Thermos. But suddenly it stung her throat with the vile burning of Clorox. She gagged and dropped the goblet and spilled the nectar on the ground. She woke filled with a great sorrow, an ache of emptiness and loss, as if the sea itself had drained away during the night and left her staring out at its rocky desolate bottom.

When the wheel turned again, carrying them into January, Aunt Edith said, "You know, dear, if you're planning to stay much longer, you really ought to consider what you're going to *do*. The junior college is only five minutes away, and I think perhaps it would be best if you went down and registered. I'm sure there won't be any problem about your not being a California resident. Henry will see to that. But you mustn't stay cooped up in the house all the time, that's the main thing. It's not healthy. Ever since Christmas you've been getting more and more withdrawn. Isn't that so, Victoria?"

"Yes'm," Victoria said, not looking up from the ironing.

"I'm only thinking of what's best for you, dear. Your mother entrusted you to my care, and she'd be so disappointed if you didn't get better."

"All right, Aunt Edith. I'll see about getting into school." She didn't want to face the other students. A gulf separated her from them, a gulf that they wouldn't know existed and that she could never explain. But she was trapped. The only alternative was to go back to Illinois.

That night, lying in bed, she heard an eerie flutelike melody leaping and cavorting outside on the lawn. She knew instantly what it was—the satyr, piping on his pipes. Lively, lascivious, the piping crawled under the covers with her and made her sweat. She got up and made sure the outside door was locked and the window latched. For good measure she propped a chair against the hall door. Even so, she slept feverishly, the piping insinuating itself into her dreams.

In the morning when she woke, the piping was gone. The room was as still and silver as on the first morning after she arrived. But on the pillow beside her lay a single freshly picked blue wildflower.

She moaned aloud in fear. The bedroom wasn't safe any more—not content to watch from the lawn, they were coming inside while she slept. She looked around the room very slowly, breathing through her mouth,

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expecting to see a statue standing in the corner. But she was alone. And when she checked the doors and windows, there was no sign of forced entry.

Standing at the window in her nightgown, she looked down at the woods. The golden flood of morning sun slanted down into the trees. "What do you want from me?" she said. "Why won't you leave me alone?" There was no answer, only a single dark bird that took wing and flew east toward the sun. "Whatever you're trying to do, it won't work. I'm going home now. I'm going back to Illinois. You can't stop me, so please don't try."

"Aunt Edith," she said at breakfast, "I've decided I can't impose on you any longer. You've been very nice, and I appreciate everything you've done. But it's time for me to go home."

"Well, I think perhaps that's best, dear," Aunt Edith said, placidly buttering toast. "Not that your Uncle Henry and I don't enjoy having you here. We do. But now that you've had a chance to get your strength back, you'll be able to face your problems squarely. In the long run it's no good hiding from things. They always catch up with you sooner or later."

Out in the woods there were things that Laura didn't want to catch up with her, not ever. But that wasn't what Aunt Edith was talking about. Laura said, "You know what I did?"

"I'm not so sure it's any of my business, dear. That's between you and your conscience. I'm sure at heart you're a good Christian girl. Whatever trouble you've had was out of inexperience and confusion, not willful perversity. My goodness, how could somebody like your father raise a child who was willfully perverse? Now that you've had a chance to rest and think things over, I'm sure you'll agree that your parents do know what's best. After all, they're so much older—well, perhaps not so *very* much older, but they've seen a great deal more of the world than you, and their faith has assured them of living happy, fulfilling lives, the kind of life you'll want to have for yourself someday. Don't you agree?"

Laura stared at the crumbs scattered in the egg yolk on her plate, trying to read an answer in them that wasn't there. "I guess so," she said.

Two thousand miles away, the phone was ringing. Laura held the receiver to her cheek and said silently, "Please nobody answer, please nobody be home, please . . ."

"Hello?"

"Mama? Mama, is that you?"

"Laura! It's so good to hear your voice, dear. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mama. How are you?"

"Oh, I can't complain. We had more snow last night. I've just been out shovelling the walk, and you know how hard that is, with my back."

"Why can't—" Why can't Daddy do it? But you weren't to criticize your parents. Instead she said, "How are Tracy and Ann?"

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"Just fine, dear."

"Mama, I'm— I want to come home. If I can. If it's all right."

"All right?" Her mother's voice vibrated like a taut string. "Oh, darling, of *course* it's all right. That's wonderful! Your father will be—oh, there's something I have to tell you. Honey, we've got a surprise for you. Just *wait* till you hear. You know that boy you got to know at school? The one you were—you know, that you were friends with? Stanley. Well, when the Christmas vacation started at college, Stanley came down here to Mattoon to find you. He was worried because you hadn't been at college this fall. So we made him welcome, because at first we didn't know who he *was,* you hadn't told us his name, and it turned out that he didn't know anything about—about the trouble you had, because you hadn't written to let him know. Well, he explained how guilty he'd been feeling, and he said that now that he knew, he felt ten times worse, and the only thing that would make it right was for him to marry you. Isn't that wonderful? He was so *noble* about it. And at first your father wouldn't hear of it, because he was pretty angry when he found out who Stanley was, but by and by they got to talking, and it turned out they have a great deal in common. Did you know Stanley is thinking of becoming a *minister?* Isn't that wonderful? So your father saw the light, and he's given his blessing. You can be married just as *soon* as you'd like. It's all settled. I knew you'd be thrilled when you heard, but we didn't want to rush you, we thought it would be best to wait until you called of your own accord, and now you have, and everything is going to be all right again. Isn't it wonderful? Praise the Lord!"

Laura's body had gone numb. In the pause at the other end of the line she found she had nothing to say. So she said nothing.

"Laura? Did you hear me? Are you there?"

Yes, I heard you. But the words didn't have enough force to become speech. They hung inside her, suspended from the roof of a great dark cavern, swaying slightly.

"Laura? Laura?"

Very gently she hung up the phone. Somehow her feet guided themselves out of the kitchen and down the hall. Behind her the phone rang, and Aunt Edith answered it. Laura kept walking.

"I don't know. She was here a minute ago. You were? Hold on a minute. Laura. Laura! Where are you?"

She turned and went into Uncle Henry's study. It was as good a place as any. She sat down on the floor beside the suit of armor. The metal was cool against her cheek. She considered how nice it would be to live inside a suit of armor. The armor would be stiff, so you couldn't move around much, but that wouldn't matter. People would attach ropes to your arms and legs, and they could move you wherever they wanted and you'd just stand there until they moved you again. Some of the positions they put you in might be unpleasant, but you could never be hurt, because you'd be inside the armor. You wouldn't have to worry, you wouldn't

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have to think at all, you wouldn't have to do anything or try to escape from anything. It would be cool and dark and quiet.

She became aware that Aunt Edith was shaking her shoulder. "Laura—Laura, are you all right? Your mother's on the phone. She says you were cut off. You didn't hang up on her, did you?"

Laura looked warily at Aunt Edith's face. It was still impossible to say anything.

"I'll tell her you'll call her back later," Aunt Edith said firmly. Her face went away.

Moving mechanically, Laura got to her feet and went down the hall to her bedroom and got her suitcase out of the closet and set it on the bed and opened it and started putting things in. I'll go away to San Francisco, she said to herself. But where she would stay and how she would get money were questions without answers, so after a while she sat down in the chair, leaving the suitcase open on the bed with clothes strewn around it, and stared at the wall and didn't think about anything at all. Blue wildflowers and the music of pipes chased each other across her mind, and she barely noticed.

Aunt Edith came in, frowned worriedly, and perched on the edge of the bed. "Your mother told me the good news," she said. "I think it's wonderful that you and this boy are going to be married. He sounds like a fine young man, and I'm sure you'll be very happy. I'm afraid I *don't* understand why you're reacting this way. Naturally when you've been single it takes some getting used to the idea of being married. There are compensations, believe me. Security, for one thing. I understand this Stanley is a fine upstanding Christian boy with big plans for the future. I'd hate to see you pass up an opportunity like that, dear. There's no telling *when* another boy like that will come along. I was lucky to catch your Uncle Henry, believe me. And I had sense enough to know it. Why, I remember when he first . . ."

Laura let the words flow together into a gurgle. After a while she noticed that Aunt Edith had gone.

She might have sat without moving forever, but eventually she had to go to the bathroom. Sitting on the toilet with her jeans around her ankles, she looked down at her naked body, seeing it for the first time. Experimentally she touched herself, felt the firm flesh of her thighs, the wiry luxuriant hair where they met. She remembered the pain, but when she probed with her fingers it was entirely gone. She traced the soft folds lingeringly, a thing she had never done before. She was a mystery to herself. She rubbed—and gasped at the strange sensation and jerked her hand away. Suddenly the air was cold on her legs. She reached down and pulled her pants up. But before she fastened them she touched herself once more, leaving a bookmark.

Uncle Henry came home from work and the three of them sat down to dinner. Aunt Edith told him all about how Laura was going to marry the nice boy from college, and Laura found that she could say, "Mmm-

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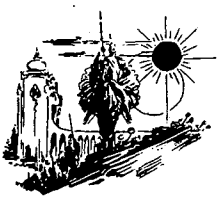
hmm," and even form short sentences without the slightest trouble. They were talking about somebody else. After dinner she watched television for a while before she went to her room. The suitcase was still sitting open. Outside the window a three-quarter moon was high, casting brilliant shadows, haloed by a circle of stratospheric ice. She looked out across the lawn, her breath flickering on the glass. Gradually the sounds of the house and the city beyond submerged in stillness. At the edge of the woods, then, she saw pale figures—three, four, five; six. Without seeming to move, they shifted up the lawn toward the house, shimmering shapes that swam in and out behind the moonlight.

The piping started. It trilled. It trickled. It curled into her ears and slid in loops along her limbs. Somewhere in her a small leaping spark answered it.

Turning her back on the window, she crossed the room to switch out the light and put on her coat. In front of the dresser she paused. The two ludicrous little china dolls were standing there, smirking cutely in the reflected moonlight. She picked them up, one in each hand, and dropped them on the rug. Carefully but firmly, she brought her heel down on one and then the other, crushing them to powder. Then, not looking back, she went to the door and unbolted and opened it and stepped outside. ●



MARTIN GARDNER (from page 94)

READERS' RESPONSE TO "TECHNOLOGY ON VZIGS"

Last May, the puzzle "Technology on Vzigs" made use of a reverse alphabet cipher in which $A = Z$, $B = Y$, $C = X$, and so on for the rest of the alphabet. I asked readers if they could find any common English words of more than four letters that became other words when coded in this way. Patricia Moore, of Golden Valley, MN, was the first to respond. (For her amazing discovery, see page 12 of the Letters column.) Other respondents included Theodore Beck, of Stanton, CA, who sent a list of 53 word pairs. Carl Kadie, of Urbana, IL, concocted this sentence: *Oft Levi Mix told Zig, lug over NRC glow art.* The cipher text reads: *Lug over NRC glow art, often Levi Mix told Zig.* Incidentally, Leopold Bloom, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, uses a reverse alphabet cipher to record the name and address of a woman with whom he is having a clandestine correspondence.

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

Extra(Ordinary) People
By Joanna Russ
St. Martin's Press, $10.95

Science fiction is kid stuff.

Many of us have been fighting that particular opinion for more years than most of today's readers have candles on their birthday cakes. After all, SF is by, for, and about adults, isn't it? It deals with complicated concepts and advanced thinking, certainly beyond the famous 12-year-old mentality that Hollywood films supposedly used to be aimed at. Doesn't it?

And it has really grown up in the past twenty years, anyhow. Now it has sex, and that's grownup stuff, n'est-ce pas?

The voice is getting weaker.

One looks at the new releases section of the shop devoted to SF and fantasy, and the voice gets weaker yet. Post holocaust slaughter, action-adventure space opera, and whimsical dragons abound. Oh, sure, some of the SF deals with *very* complicated matters such as black holes, tachyons, and all the possible ramifications of the latest computer breakthrough, and some of the fantasies are sophisticated in a sophomoric sort of way.

But hardly any of it deals with the very complicated matter of people, particularly adult people. Yes, today's characters are more than cardboard. They've advanced to, maybe, styrofoam. SF authors have learned *something* over the years, and dialogue is more realistic, and the people have more facets to their characters than Buck Rogers did. They even jump in and out of bed with each other, which Buck Rogers never did. But are they adults?

One is tempted to think that, no, SF is not stuff for kids; it's stuff for *bright* kids.

One of the basic questions here is, of course, what *is* kid stuff, and what *is* adult stuff? (Let's ignore the unfortunate overtones the word "adult" has picked up, as in "adult book store.") This is a question which I can fudge with grace, since it would take more space than I have in a year of columns to come anywhere close to an answer. But perhaps a simple default will work temporarily. Adult stuff is stuff that kids—even bright kids—would neither like nor understand. As an example, let's cite *Brideshead Revisited* (either book or series—for once, TV didn't aim at the 12-year-old). Know any kids that were glued to their sets over it?

Back in the 1960s, there seemed to be some hope that SF was aiming for maturity (as the rest of the culture was sliding in the other direction). Writers such as Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin,

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Joanna Russ, and Thomas Disch were applying the matters of science fiction to the matters of people, adult people, and the results were often a revelation. But in the '70s, the big bucks turned out to be in the direction of *Star Wars* and dragons, and that's where publishers and authors went. And that's what the new and vast SF and fantasy audience want. There *are* readers out there that want more, but they are inundated by the adolescents, who outnumber them. A good analogy can be made with the record industry—rock is where the money is, and it dominates the recording industry, and it's aimed at the adolescent buyer.

But SF still has its Mozarts (or at least its Cole Porters), and they still manage to get published. The above-mentioned Joanna Russ is one, and there is a new collection, *Extra(Ordinary) People*, from her pen. And it is for and (mostly) about adults.

There are five stories. The first, "Souls," won the 1983 Hugo Award for best novella; its concern is the moral and spiritual conflict between a Viking raider and the raidee, the Abbess of a rich religious community. While there is some sacking, pillaging, and slaughtering, the heart of the story is the conversations between the two; the Abbess has some surprising opinions for a religious lady, and some surprising powers. Things turn out rather unexpectedly. This is the only one of the stories to have appeared in a genre magazine; the other four are much more oblique (as well as, curiously enough, taking the form of letters), more humorous, and concerned with sexual matters usually considered outside the norm; three of them are sexually rather graphic.

"The Mystery of the Young Gentleman" reflects its title in a 19th century setting, on a transAtlantic crossing. "Bodies" is in a semi-far future; "What Did You Do During the Revolution, Grandma?" is in an alternate world. Each is, as usual with Russ, about the outsider. In "Mystery," it's a telepathic person of very mixed sexuality; here Russ is almost too oblique (could it be the constraint of the Victorian writing style?) and lost me a couple of times as to the nature of her hero(ine). The persons of the future in "Bodies" have no specific gender, and wouldn't they, in reviving someone from our century, choose a sort of adolescent Quentin Crisp? Utter confusion on both sides.

In "What Did You Do . . .," a woman from the only absolute real universe (1.0 in the reality scale) must pose as a Siva-like demon (male) in a less real universe (+0.892 . . .) which is sort of fairy-tale barbarian. The resulting complications are pretty funny, until it turns out that her world is not *really* 1.0. The final story, "Everyday Depressions," is not really a story at all; it's more or less a proposal for a lesbian Gothic novel. This is the funniest piece in the book; not so much for the basic idea (which has already been wittily done on the other side of the fence in *Gaywick*, a novel Russ acknowledges as her take-off point), as for her comments and asides about the project, and some outrageous in

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jokes ("Lady M's mother was a Sheldon of Deepdene, Alice Tiptree by name").

The problem is that it's a little unfair to give us the proposal and not the novel. In fact, the major question that can be raised about all these stories is that one wants more; there is the feeling that in each story there is a novel struggling to get out. Does this indicate success or failure in a short story? I really don't know. But in any case, adults—read and enjoy.

(Addendum. Let me make it perfectly clear that I like kid stuff. I'm crazy for *Star Wars*, the Belgariad, Edgar Rice Burroughs—and Dr. Who's on first so far as I'm concerned. I just would like to see a balance, a demand for more mature works, and the feeling that not everything must be aimed at, or include something for, the adolescent.)

Riders of Sidhe
By Kenneth C. Flint
Bantam, $2.75 (paper)

In *Riders of Sidhe* Kenneth C. Flint has chosen to tell of the mythical conflict between the heroic Tuatha de Danaan and the evil Fomor for prehistoric Ireland. The protagonist is a teen-aged lad who has been raised on a barren island by a woman guardian and her warriors. His home is attacked and destroyed by a force wielding bizarre machines of war led by an inhuman creature with one eye which has great destructive powers.

He takes refuge with the sea god, Manannan, on the deity's idyllic island, where he lives in a sort of elf mound (larger inside than out), the Sidhe. Manannan knows something of the boy's antecedents, but refuses to tell him anything unless he goes to Eire to check out the situation there, which is troubled (*plus ça change . . .*). The human Tuatha are being exploited and ill used by the monstrous Fomor, despite the fact that they have a great many heroes and such like among their company. The grotesque Fomor, who come from the sea to the north (from a tower of glass on yet another island) and are all freakishly misshapen in some way, have the co-operation of the human High King, Bres.

Now you don't need to know Celtic mythology, and you don't even need to know that the boy's name is Lugh, to guess that he is Somebody, or at least is *going* to be Somebody. Or that the one-eyed Balor is connected with the Fomor, and that after many adventures Lugh is going to confront them, helped by the various heroes of the Tuatha. Flint gives a certain novelty to this by hinting throughout at a rational basis for the stuff of legend. The Fomor, for instance, are the remnants of a great race of the past who were able to "harness all nature to their selfish ends"; this, of course, brought on a huge catastrophe and what was left of the race remained in their glass fortress, more and more contaminated by that which they had set loose (i.e., they blew up the works with super science, and mutated through residual radioactivity—did I really need to say that?).

The author struggles a bit to fit the legends (which like all legends are not the most coherent of sto-

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ries) into some sort of sensible narrative, and the strain shows at times. Nor is he the smoothest of writers. But it's all rather lighthearted, quick, and charming (the word "blarney" comes to mind); the sly and irreverent congod, Manannan (always the most intriguing of the Irish pantheon anyway) is a particularly felicitous piece of characterization.

Sidhe, by the way, is one of those particularly difficult Gaelic words; the pronunciation (according to that prototypical writer on Irish mythology, Lady Gregory, who should know) is *shee*.

The Last Day of Creation
By Wolfgang Jeschke (translated by Gertrud Mander)
St. Martin's Press, $12.95

The long arm of coincidence strikes in Wolfgang Jeschke's *The Last Day of Creation*. A group of humans find themselves trapped on the Earth of 5.3 million years ago, concurrent with saber-tooth tigers, ape-men just awakening to intelligence, and a dry Mediterranean, which they manage to start to fill by blowing a hole in the ridge between it and the Atlantic, incidentally creating a 400-meter-high waterfall. That is, of course, the basic situation of Julian May's "Saga of Pliocene Exile," and there's no way around mentioning it, since it is so startlingly similar. Part of the point in mentioning it, though, is to point out that it *is* coincidence, since Jeschke's book is copyright 1981 (time of publication in Germany, perhaps?) and Brian Aldiss's "Afterward" was written even earlier, in 1979.

And aside from that basic premise, *The Last Day of Creation* is also a different kettle of fish indeed; in fact, it's rather a treat to see what two different authors make of a promising premise. Here the departure point to the past is our own time, the sponsor our own government; the time travel project is a secret one of NASA. The point is to build pipelines in *that* time to remove the oil from the Middle East and ship it forward to the contemporary Western consumers.

The author's approach to the paradoxes of time travel is a little naïve, or he at least presents his characters as being so (the government and military officials and scientific personnel involved). They know they will succeed since artifacts have been found which can only be from that period and which can only have been made in our time. Three of these are traced in detail in an opening section in documentary, "non-fictional" style. (One happens to be a holy relic of the Catholic Church, thought to be the sexual organ of St. Vitus; it turns out to be the plastic hose pipe of an oxygen mask.) Then the reader is presented with the detailed planning session for the project, and the recruitment process for those to take part, and at least this reader kept waiting for someone to raise the point that such a radical change in the past would radically change the present. Even in the simplest terms, the lack of oil in the Near East would make great differences in this century. But this doesn't seem to occur to anyone.

Another matter which strains the reader's credulity is that this

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whole project is rushed into operation before any certain method has been found to reverse the time travel process; i.e., not only is it uncertain that the oil will be got forward (or back, as it were), but that the personnel involved will get back (or forward, as it were). The author vaguely blames this little miscalculation on the military's rush to complete the project before the "other side" beats them, but even the most inept of military minds would not have been quite this dumb.

And dumb it is, since the great dumps of men (transhipped a few at a time because of weight and mass problems) and material sent into the past are stuck there. There are other little problems, such as the scatter effect which has men leaving the present a day apart arriving in the past separated by many years. And yes, much of the population is from alternate futures, not necessarily friendly ones. This may or may not have been caused by the project to begin with; things get a little vague around this area.

If you can overlook the rather large lapses in logic, once one gets into the past the novel takes on the expected excitement almost always engendered by the marooned-in-primeval-times theme, and is a lot of action-packed fun.

"Doctor Who": The Unfolding Text
By John Tullock and Manuel Alvarado
St. Martin's Press; $9.95 (paper)

"Doctor Who meets the academics" might be the title of this volume. Usually when a great scholarly treatise is presented on some popular phenomenon that I enjoy, my impulse is to go off in the other direction, since the results of reading such is often like seeing a Fuzzy dissected and dried in a museum case. But this one is slightly different.

Perhaps the briefest of explanations about Doctor Who might be in order for those who have not seen the program by choice or by circumstance. The latter possibility is all too likely since it is syndicated in the U.S., which means it can turn up anywhere on the dial at any time, if at all, and I know there are areas which simply haven't been able to see it. This is tragic, since it's a witty, imaginative program which is lightweight, but never insults the intelligence. Doctor Who is a "Time Lord" who galumphs through time and space taking care of nasty situations in the past and future, here and elsewhere. The program has been produced in Britain for over twenty years. In America, we've seen only a small percentage of the many episodes that have been made; nevertheless, the show has brought forth a cult following second only to that of *Star Trek* in SF-TV history.

"Doctor Who": The Unfolding Story by John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado is not like the myriad other spin-off books which the series has spawned (there is one "novel" for every episode [an episode can consist of two or more half-hour programs] as well as innumerable fan-type books). Don't expect plots or gossip in this one, though there are charming por-

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traits of the five incarnations of the Doctor (five actors have played the role on TV), one at the beginning of each section, as well as a handsome picture of Leela (Louise Jamieson), the barbarian lady who is the Doctor's sometime companion, and comparative photos of the Doctor's vehicle, the tardis, in early and late versions. But the text is a true academic thesis, and in this case a fascinating one.

The general idea is to take an *extensive* approach to the history of the program. *Extensive* is the key word, and here it doesn't mean widespread, but applies to the outside forces over twenty years that have shaped a popular TV program, and the results to the program of that shaping. *Doctor Who* is perfect for this kind of study, of course. Aside from the fact that there haven't *been* that many programs that have stayed around for 20 years, *Doctor Who* is infinitely flexible, partially *because* it's SF and has much more room to move around in with plots and style than, say, *Dallas*.

On the way, one gets an intelligent idea of the history of the show as well as various little tidbits of interest. Tom Baker's costume, for instance, is based on a famous Toulouse-Lautrec poster (presumably the one of Aristide what's-'is-name); and John Cleese has a cameo appearance in one episode.

So if you're ashamed of being a Whomanist because you think it's kid stuff, or someone has given you a hard time for watching it, read this book and flash it around a bit. It will relieve any guilt you might have for enjoying yourself.

Our Lady of Darkness
By Fritz Leiber
Ace, $2.50 (paper)

As noted last month when reviewing a new/old collection of his, Fritz Leiber has had a career not only of length, but of breadth, writing across the board every sort of fantasy from science fiction to the supernatural. *Our Lady of Darkness* leans toward the latter category, but as usual there's the hint of the coldly rational behind the supernatural. It's back in print after some years and if you're tired of the lengthy tomes that pass themselves off as contemporary horror stories, dedicated less to your losing your nerve than losing your breakfast, try it. It's succinct and scarey.

I lost my nerve after two chapters (this was reading late and lonely at night), but I had a certain advantage. I'd read M.R. James, the paradigm of ghost story writers, and Leiber sneakily evokes an image from a James story in the second chapter, a perfectly harmless image to anyone unfamiliar with that particular story. This could be regarded as second-hand scariness, but Leiber carries it through, building on James (who wrote only short stories, never a novel) and telling you he's doing so by quoting the master almost immediately.

The basic idea of the novel is stated by one of the characters, who says "Why shouldn't a modern city have its special ghosts, like castles and graveyards and big old manor houses once had?" The city in this case is San Francisco, the geography of which Leiber obviously

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knows like the back of his hand, as well as the history. In the process of unraveling the sinister things that seem to be happening, the narrator (much of whose life bears an uncanny resemblance to what one knows of Leiber's) manages to find that most of the characters from the city's (real) outré literary past are involved, including Jack London, Clark Ashton Smith, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce, and Dashiell Hammett (there's even a link with the Maltese Falcon).

The sinister things themselves center around two books. One is a strange treatise from around the turn of the century on "megapolisomancy," which is vaguely on the magic of large cities (all that electricity and concrete create odd things); the other is a journal by (possibly) Clark Ashton Smith on his relationship with the author of the first book who has (possibly) laid a spell on Smith, or more or less by osmosis on *anyone* who owns the journal. In any case, our narrator's purchase of the two books has raised *something* in one of the city parks.

Our Lady of Darkness is a good, scarey read which is mercifully short. Brevity, after all, is the soul of the horror story, as M.R. James demonstrated once and for all.

Shoptalk . . . Jack Williamson published his first SF story in 1928, and is still active in the field; among his best known works are the "Legion of Space" stories, second only to the Lensman series to lovers of period space opera, and *The Humanoids*. He has chronicled this amazingly long career in an amazingly short autobiography, *Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction*; anyone interested in the genre should read it. (Bluejay Books, $15.95) . . . Since this is the November issue, it might not be amiss to make some Christmas suggestions, always a problem for the SF reader who is likely to already have anything one might choose to give him/her. This is being written too far up front to do a suggested list for specific titles as the mainstream book pages are wont to do, but a general idea might be in order. How about one of the many limited, boxed and/or signed editions that are being published these days (going on the assumption that the best gift is one so luxurious that the giftee would feel guilty about getting it for him/herself). They are usually published in such small editions that it's hard to say what is available at any given time, but Sturgeon's *Venus + X*, Herbert's *Heretics of Dune* or Vance's *Cugel's Saga* might still be around (in a range of about $40 to $75).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ⊙

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With everybody rested up from the WorldCon, the Fall con(vention) season is ready to start in earnest. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [long] envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273–6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send cons an SASE when writing. For free listings, tell me about your con six months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

SEPTEMBER, 1984

28–30—**Ad Astra.** For info, write: **Box 7276 Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9.** Or phone: **(703) 273–6111** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Toronto ON (if city omitted, same as in address) at Howard Johnson's Airport Hotel. Guests will include: Dean Ing, Robert (Doc) Passovoy.

27–Oct. 1—**French Nat. Con, % Ruf, 140 rue Gunoud, F–54000 Vandoeuvre, France.** Nancy, France.

OCTOBER, 1984

5–7—**StarCall. (703) 281–2711.** Washington DC. Space exploration emphasis at this 2nd annual con.

5–7—**Contradiction.** John's Hotel Niagara, Niagara Falls NY. Donald Kingsbury, Samuel R. Delany. Masquerade. Chocolate symposium/pigout. Batsu breakfast. People auction. Last fling before winter.

12–14—**World Fantasy Con.** Westin Hotel, Ottawa ON. Tanith Lee, Jane Yolen, Jeff Jones, Spider Robinson. Award banquet. The WorldCon for fantasy fans. Has emphasized dark fantasy (horror, sword/sorcery, etc.), but is trying to include high fantasy (Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, etc.).

19–21—**Western Recon, Box 510581, Salt Lake City UT 84151.** Anne (Pern) McCaffrey, Richard and Wendy (Elfquest) Pini, M. Z. (Darkover) Bradley, Paul E. Zimmer, James Tucker. Masquerade. Banquet.

19–21—**Ursa Major, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** Gordon Dickson, artists K. Freas, M. Maxwell.

26–28—**RoVaCon. Box 117, Salem VA 24153. Roanoke VA.** Jo Clayton, R. Pini, M. Foster, K. Freas.

NOVEMBER, 1984

9–11—**TzarKon, 1040 S. McKnight Rd., Richmond Hts. MO 63117.** St. Louis MO. No more info on this.

9–11—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670.** Karl Edward Wagner, Phil Foglio, Somtow (Aquila) Sucharitkul, Polly & Kelly Freas, John & Dorsey Flynn, Allen Wold, Colleen Doran, Kay Reynolds.

16–18—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Larry Niven, artist Sean Spacher. Since 1936.

23–25—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601.** Pasadena CA. Curt Siodmak, Forrest J. Ackerman, Bill Warren. The traditional, annual LA-area con. About a thousand fans are expected.

23–25—**Darkover Grand Council Meeting, Box 8113, Silver Spring, MD 20907.** Wilmington DE.

AUGUST, 1985

22–26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Join for $50 to the end of 1984.

30–Sep. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The North American SF Interim Con for 1985 (NASFIC's are held only in years when WorldCon is outside North America). 3000 fans expected.

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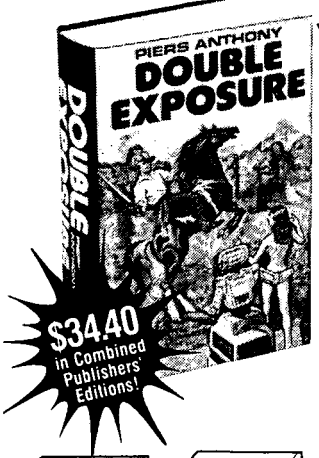

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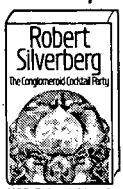

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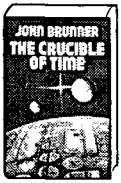

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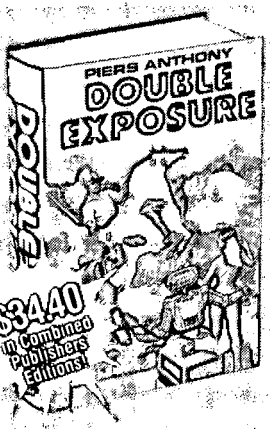

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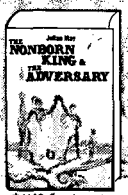

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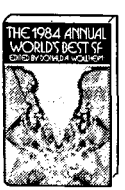

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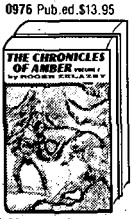

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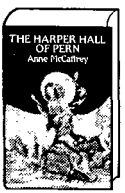

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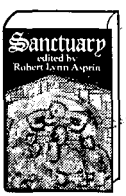

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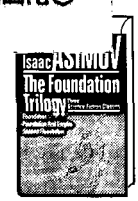

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